GAMEINFORMER

DEAD ISLAND 2

Ice Cream
25¢
Burg
BREAKFAST
MENU

↘ **From our cover story:** The sights, sounds, and of course, zombies of Los Angeles take center stage in Dead Island 2. Head to page 36 for more information on how Dambuster Studios turned LA into Hell-A.

Developed by Dambuster Studios / Published by Deep Silver

EDITOR'S NOTE

STRESSED OUT

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

DESPITE THE METEORIC RISE OF GAMING, I sometimes still find myself talking with someone who doesn't play games, as they wonder aloud why adults would engage in the hobby, much less work in the field. Setting aside the tactlessness and implied insult to most of the people I work with on a professional basis, it always seems like a strange argument, ignoring the idea that life without a bit of fun can be a dark and overwhelming experience.

That's not to say gamers have found some secret panacea that saves us from the anxieties of modern life. But ask most people who have embraced the hobby, and at least some part of the appeal is a relief from stress. Talking to people who play games, there's almost invariably a component about having a brief respite from the anxieties and challenges of daily life and a retreat, however fleeting, into an immersive interactive experience.

In recent weeks, I was alarmed to encounter a poll completed for the American Psychological Association that found 27 percent of Americans stating they were so stressed on most days they couldn't function. That number jumped up to 46 percent for those under 35. Even if we choose to be skeptical of polling data in a more general sense, it's hard to dismiss those kinds of numbers.

So, when people ask why gaming has a place as an activity for adults, it's not hard for me to offer a potent argument for its value.

Sure, many of us play games as a social engagement with friends and family. Sometimes we play for a love of storytelling and characters, cooperation or competition, and a love of technical mastery mixed with design sophistication. But we also play because it lightens the load and captures our attention away for a time. Games take us on journeys into imaginative realities, often with clear rules, expectations, and systems that defy what we find in real life. Critics invariably cite that flight into escapism as some moral failing. The reality is most of us spend some time in those alternate spaces and return to real life refreshed and rewarded. And hopefully, we arrive back a bit more ready to function and face what's ahead.

In short, games can't solve our problems. But if they give us a few minutes or hours to lower the tension and anxiety that seem so abundant in all our lives, that's an intrinsic value that's more than worth celebrating.

Play well. Be well.

GAMEINFORMER
DEAD ISLAND 2

DEAD ISLAND 2

After years of troubled development and the changing of studio hands, Dead Island 2 is finally nearing the finish line nine years after it was originally announced. We visited Dambuster Studios in Nottingham, England to get extended hands-on with the game and speak with the team about its approach to the Dead Island franchise.

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Wesley LeBlanc

Associate Editor

In my last spotlight, I mentioned how much I want a single-player pirate game. That still remains the case. But this time, I want to tell you to watch *Black Sails*, a fantastic show about pirates. Its four seasons serve as a brutal and mature sequel to *Treasure Island* that doubles as an excellent love story in various ways. Plus, God of War Ragnarök composer Bear McCreary did the score, and it's top-tier. Give the show's title sequence a watch, and I promise his theme will have you interested in checking the series out.

Marcus Stewart

Associate Editor

I am absolutely drowning in games. God of War Ragnarök. A Plague Tale: Requiem. Pentiment. Marvel's Midnight Suns. Signalis. And so many more. I want to invent *Dragon Ball Z's* Hyperbolic Time Chamber so I have enough time to finish all these amazing titles before the year's end. But since I have so many games to play, that also means I don't have time to learn the science and engineering skills required to construct such a device. 'Tis a vicious, wonderful cycle.

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The Tango Gameworks developers fell back in love with their city during the development of Ghostwire: Tokyo. We toured the real-life locations that inspired them.

28 **HOW MORTAL KOMBAT 9 SAVED THE FRANCHISE**

Not even middling reviews and bankrupt publishers could end the tournament. We talked to numerous developers behind Mortal Kombat 9 about how it rebooted the series, saving the bloody fighting franchise from an early fatality.

36 **COVER STORY – DEAD ISLAND 2**

After three developers and nearly 10 years, Dead Island 2 is about to be released. We can hardly believe it, either. We flew to developer Dambuster Studios' office in England to play seven hours of the game and talk to the team bringing it to the finish line.

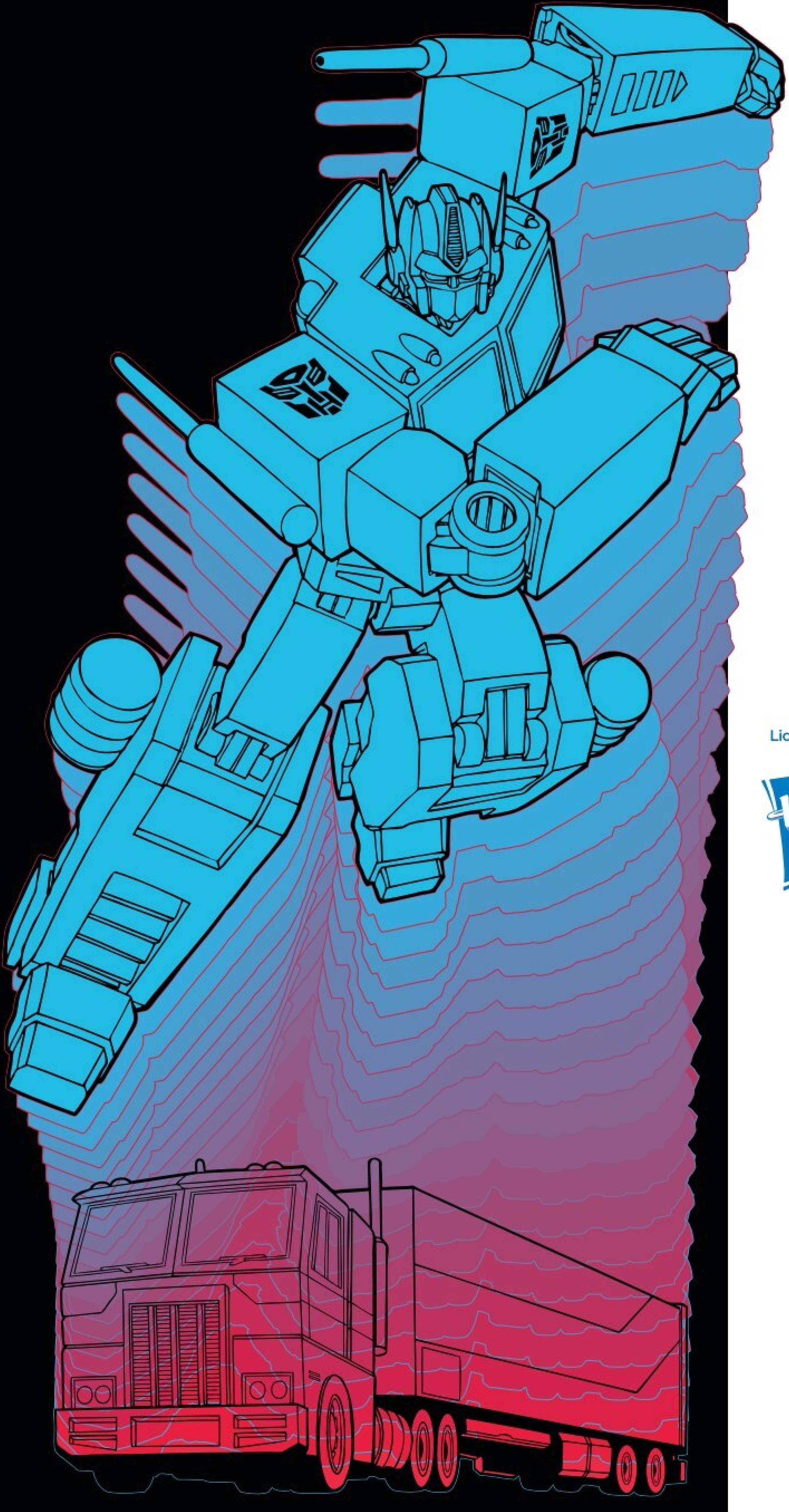
46 **WITCHFIRE**

Hunt down witches, undead, and demons in this new FPS roguelite from The Astronauts, the developers of The Vanishing of Ethan Carter.

54 **ONE PIECE ODYSSEY**

Despite being a billion-dollar entertainment industry, we don't see too many big-budget licensed anime games – and even fewer are worth playing. That might all change with One Piece Odyssey. Read our feature for everything you need to know about the Straw Hat crew's RPG adventure.

Transform your collection.



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Replies

STREET FIGHTER 6

One of my most played games ever is Street Fighter IV. So much so that my original 80GB Metal Gear Solid 4 bundle PlayStation 3 got the so-called "Yellow Light of Death" with that disc in it, most likely due to how much I put it through the wringer playing the game almost every day for up to nine hours or more. When Street Fighter V came out, I thought, "Well sure I'm older now and I have more responsibilities, but this will most likely be my most played game on PS4 right?" Despite all the fantastic updates the game had throughout the years it definitely was a letdown for my high expectations.

I know the answer to this question can vary depending on who you ask – it is all subjective after all – but for the people like me who were ultimately disappointed in the fifth installment, does Street Fighter 6 feel like a return to what has made the franchise so special? From the simple controls of SFII evolving to a more advanced SFIII and finally matching it all together in SFIV, V just felt like a misstep in the series. It tried to be better, but got lost in too much unnecessary change. **– Roly from Omaha, Nebraska via email**

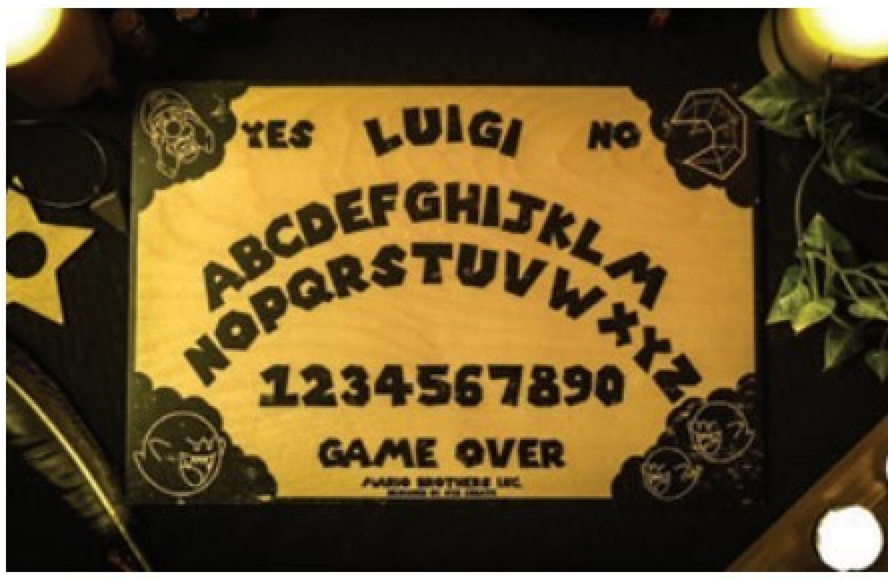
↳ *You aren't alone in feeling burnt by Street Fighter V. In our conversations with the core Street Fighter 6 developers, they kept circling back to all the lessons they've learned from Street Fighter V – particularly its launch window. The team understood it needed to have more features available at SF6's launch and appeal to a wider player base (hence the multiple control schemes). But perhaps the biggest lesson director Takayuki Nakayama and producer Shuhei Matsumoto learned was that Capcom needed to be more communicative with the player base.*

So far, everything we've seen, played, and heard about is evidence that this team, led by Nakayama and Matsumoto, is creating Street Fighter 6 with all these lessons in mind. To this point, SF6 feels like it's combining various popular elements from the most successful Street Fighter games to create something special. The developers know Street Fighter V wasn't the launch fans wanted, and the Capcom executives also seem to understand that nobody wants a repeat of that. We won't know for sure how Street Fighter 6 will turn out until it's released in June, but all indications point toward this being a return to form.

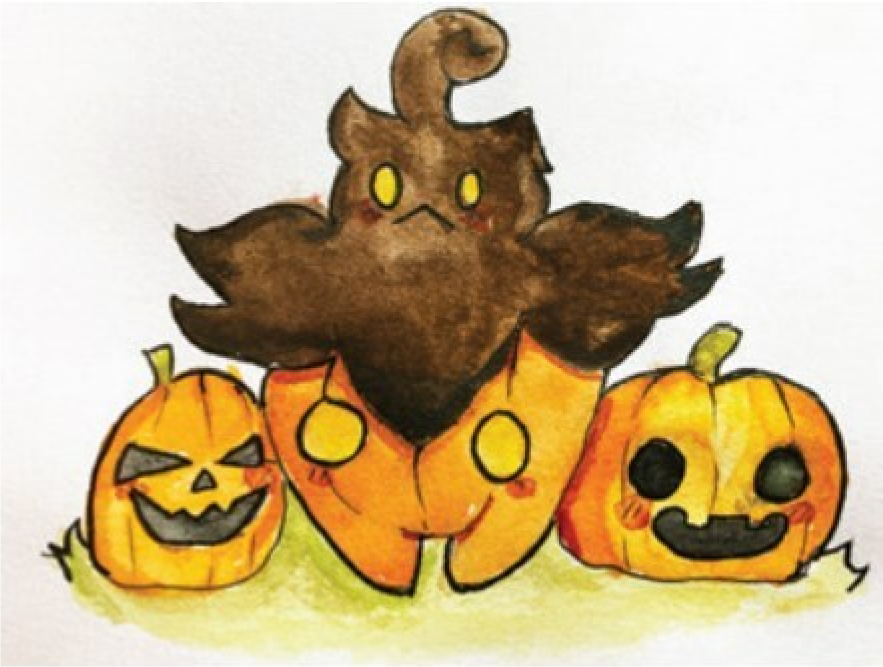
DOS THIS SOUND LIKE A POSSIBILITY?

When I was younger, I loved playing simulator games like Silent Hunter, B-17 Flying Fortress, and Guild Wars. Do you think with platforms evolving the way they are, that we will ever see those games or games currently only available on PC come to consoles?
– Brian via email

↳ *Talk about a couple blasts from the past! You are correct to point out that gaming consoles are evolving in ways that deliver more integrated experiences with PC platforms, but older, DOS-based titles might be difficult to bring over, given the obsolescence of the platform in the modern era. Of course, anything is possible, especially with the market existing for nostalgic remakes and remasters, but you might have a better shot at finding a way to play these on your PC for now. That said, we just got a modern reimagining of The Oregon Trail on Switch and PC in November, and that same month, Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration brought games from seven old Atari platforms to modern consoles, so you truly never know what developers and publishers have up their sleeves.*



Reader art submission: Dimitri X. Yiezii



Reader art submission: Nova Warwell

Reader art submission: Keith Pumphrey

DO BIG WORLDS EQUAL BIG SCORES?

Why do open-world games get higher reviews than non-open-world games? It seems like when a game has limitations to the world it automatically gets discredited by reviewers. Games like Elden Ring and, let's say, Breath of the Wild get high praise just for being open world as opposed to games like Demon's Souls or Dark Souls 3, which are linear and isolated.

This has been something that has bothered me for a while. Who's to say linear games aren't better?

– Sterling Trent Cloud from Middleton, Wisconsin via email

↳ *Open-world games often offer great opportunities to forge your own paths, lose hours exploring rich and vibrant worlds, and sometimes even experience emergent storylines based on your in-game actions. However, linear experiences have every bit as much potential as open-world titles. When open worlds are done extremely well, few things match the feelings that come from their execution, but the same could be said about a perfectly paced, narrative-heavy linear title.*

The two open-world games you mentioned did, in fact, receive the highest score available on Game Informer's *review scale, but they're also two that many would tell you are among the greatest games ever made. Looking at* Game Informer's *top-scoring reviews of 2022, we have an eclectic mix of games that range from wide-open adventures like Dying Light 2: Stay Human, Horizon Forbidden West, and the aforementioned Elden Ring to linear titles like Neon White, God of War Ragnarök, and Kirby and the Forgotten Land. Open-world games, linear games, and everything in between have important places in the gaming landscape.*

↘

Join the conversation

Send your questions, comments, and rants to Feedback@GameInformer.com

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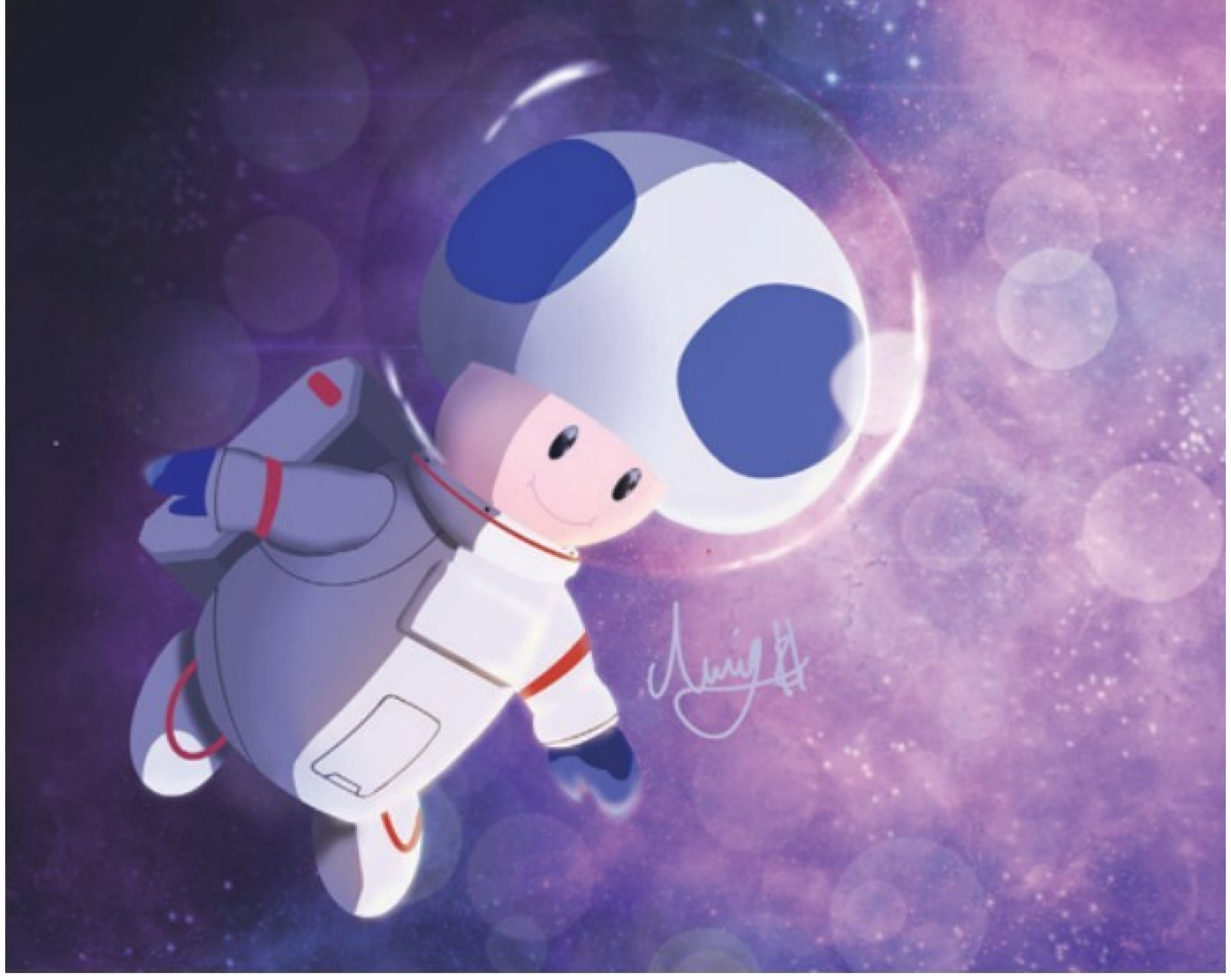
Reader art submission: Rakayla Veal



Reader art submission: Avigail Vargas

Soundoff:

Unwrapping the best gaming gifts

We asked our readers and community what their favorite gaming-related gift they ever received was. Here are some of our favorite responses:

I forget which birthday it was, but I got Call of Duty: World at War and Fallout 3 on the same birthday (the year they came out). Unfortunately, my Xbox red ringed the next day. **– Jherb24 via Discord**

At the risk of sounding sappy, the best gaming-related gift I ever got was someone's time. The GameStop by me was doing preorders for the Nintendo Wii. I had to work that day and there were only going to be about 10 pre-orders given. So, my girlfriend at the time went to the mall and waited for about 4 hours. She got there around 6 a.m. and was about fourth or fifth in line, I think. The employee that opened the store at 10 a.m. got there early and handed out tickets to the ones who were there and able to preorder. It was her giving up her time to get me a pre-order that was the gift. And you better believe I married her. Since that time, she's helped me get preorders for most every other system. When the PS5 pre-orders went live, she shoved the order down the throat of the Target website. Absolutely relentless. It was amazing. **– LegendofGamer102 via Discord**

NES. I don't remember the occasion for the gift, though. Started my love of gaming that has lasted to this day almost 40 years later. **– via Instagram**

It wasn't exactly a gift, but one day I woke up super early in the morning. I was a very young kid, back when it was the PS1 and SNES days. I go out of my room and I stand at the top of my stairs; I see on the living room television my dad is playing the console we had. I don't think he really understood it, but I knew even less about it since I was so young. I sat down next to him and watched him play. The game was Turok. He couldn't make it past a certain point in the game. He gave the controller to me and left for work. He always kindled that love of video games I have now. The gift was getting us our first console. All those video games, the memories with all these amazing games that came out then and now... it was the gift that kept on giving. **– via Instagram**

I filmed myself (on an actual tape recorder) explaining to my family why I deserved a PS2 just so I could play the Kingdom Hearts game that was advertised on TV. I waited hours for the commercial to air so I could film it. I was very pleased with my gifts that Christmas; I still have the same PS2 and Kingdom Hearts disc complete-in-box. **– via Instagram**

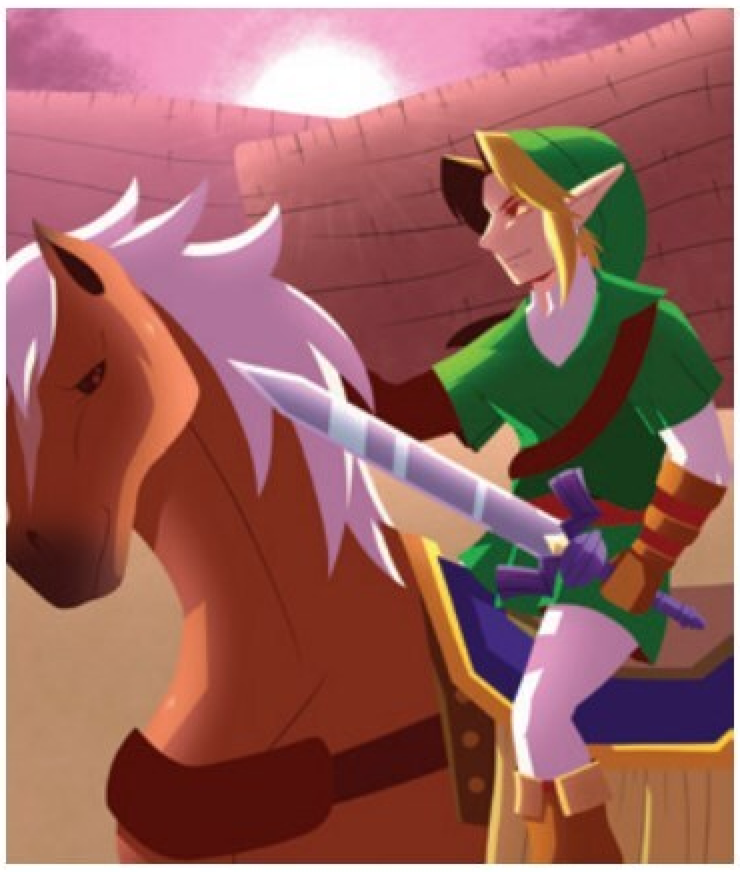
A MARVELOUS VISION

Just finished the interview with Amy Hennig of Skydance New Media about the Marvel game they're developing [Issue 350]. I was struck by several things she said, like about keeping "... this experience as widely accessible as possible ..." Throughout the interview she speaks to making a game anyone can play and enjoy. Wow! Radical concept! Doesn't she think she'll "compromise her vision" or make something that's boring, etc?

As someone who is an older gamer and watched these arguments used to justify everything from not offering any tutorial or guide, to making the game controller-smashingly difficult, I'm delighted by an attitude that acknowledges not everyone is the same skill level, has the same amount of time to invest, or wants to experience frustration on a level that one would typically associate with real-world problems.

Very refreshing and I look forward to checking out Skydance's vision.
– ornerybuddha via email

↳ ***The beauty of the game industry is that experiences appeal to a wide range of players. We have adventure games that require minimal input and decision-making to progress the story, white-knuckled action games that require perfect execution to take down a boss, and everything in between. Not every game needs to be everyone's cup of tea, but when a renowned designer like Amy Hennig (creator of the Uncharted series) feels confident she can deliver something widely appealing without compromising her vision – with a World War II story starring Captain America and Black Panther to boot – it's safe to say we're dying to learn more.***

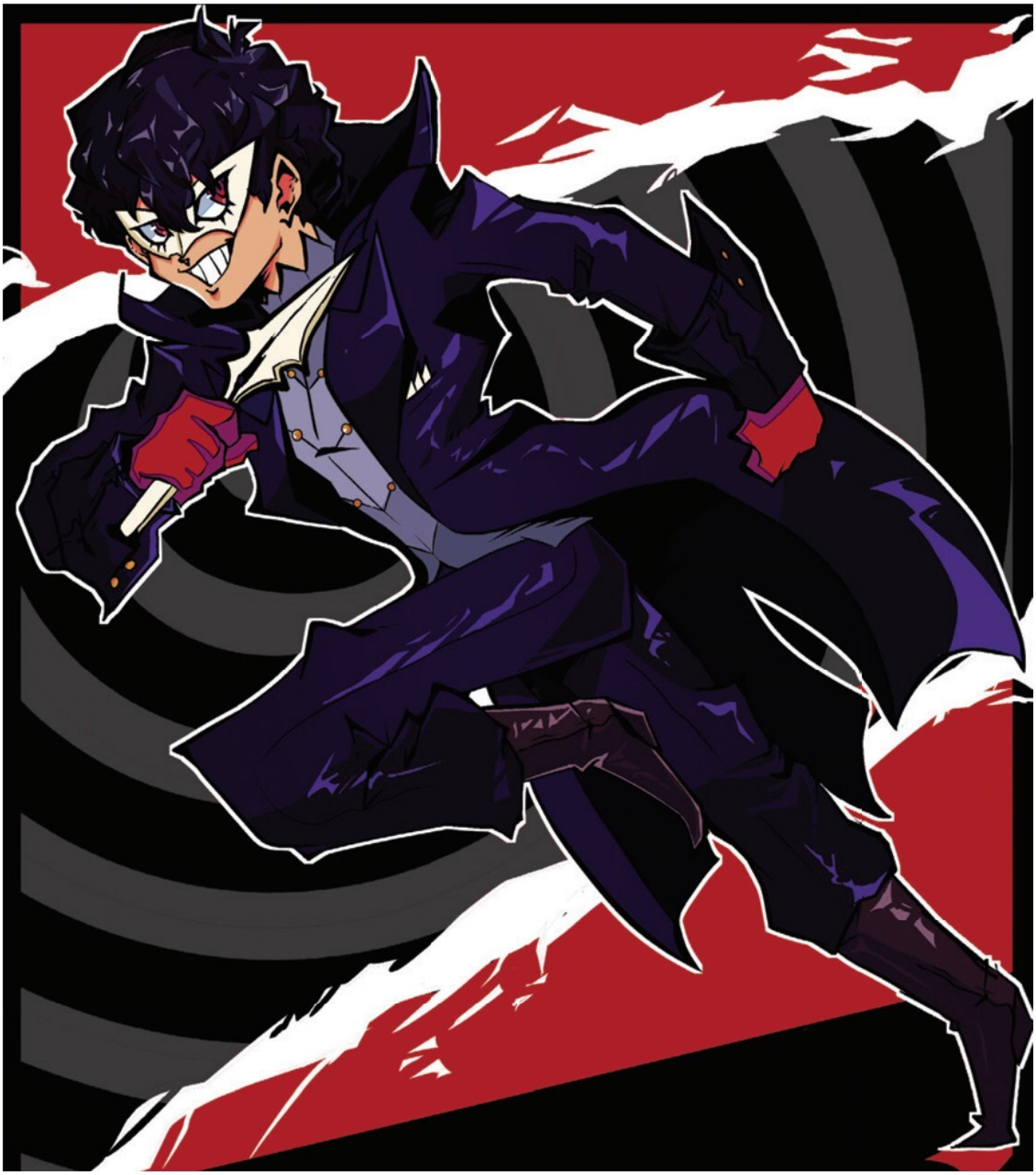


Reader art submission: Sarah G.

MYSTICAL SERENDIPITY

The strangest thing happened today. I was randomly thinking about one of my favorite games growing up, Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest, and how the music in the game was amazing when I randomly came across Matt Miller's op-ed about it ["You Are Not The Target Audience, And That's Okay"] in Issue 350! And I couldn't agree with him more about it. I tried replaying the game as an adult and stopped playing after 15 minutes — it was waaaay too simple and easy for me at this point of my gaming life. However, as Matt astutely put it, while he wasn't the kid who needed that game back in the day, I, on the other hand, was that kid and have it to thank for introducing me to the RPG genre as well as the Final Fantasy series. That game gets a lot of hate, but it holds a place in my heart. You truly never forget your first! **– Kyle from Baltimore, Maryland via email**

↳ *Everyone has those games to thank for introducing them to certain genres they love to this day. For some, their first foray into the RPG genre is a mainline, widely beloved title in a long-running series like Pokémon, while others have something more obscure. Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest has the unique distinction of being an obscure title from one of the most mainstream RPG franchises of all time, but it's as good a place as any to start. We're glad you had that formative experience with Mystic Quest, even if you recognize its faults as an adult.* ■



Reader art winner: Christopher Massie

↘

Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!

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TOURING SUPER NINTENDO WORLD

We take a trip to Universal Studio Japan's Mario-themed park

BY BRIAN SHEA

LAST YEAR, Nintendo opened Super Nintendo World, a section of Universal Studios Japan in Osaka devoted to the iconic Super Mario series. During last month's Street Fighter 6 cover trip, we decided to see the attractions for ourselves.

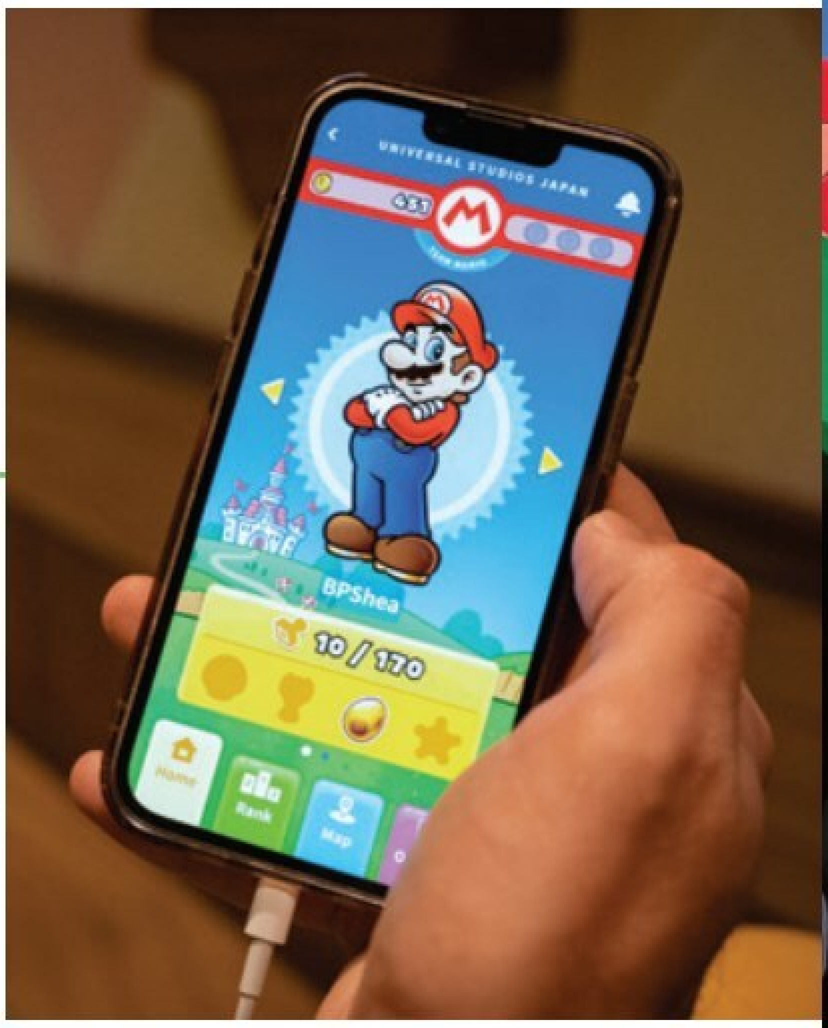
From the moment we entered Super Nintendo World, it was an incredible experience. The immersion, sights, and sounds all maintain the feeling that you're in Mushroom Kingdom.

Super Nintendo World is open now at Universal Studios Japan, but a different version is planned to open in early 2023 at Universal Studios Hollywood. Universal Orlando's version opens in 2025 as part of its upcoming Epic Universe park.

Visit YouTube.com/GameInformer for a video tour of Super Nintendo World

To get to Super Nintendo World, you must walk through Universal Studios Japan's main area

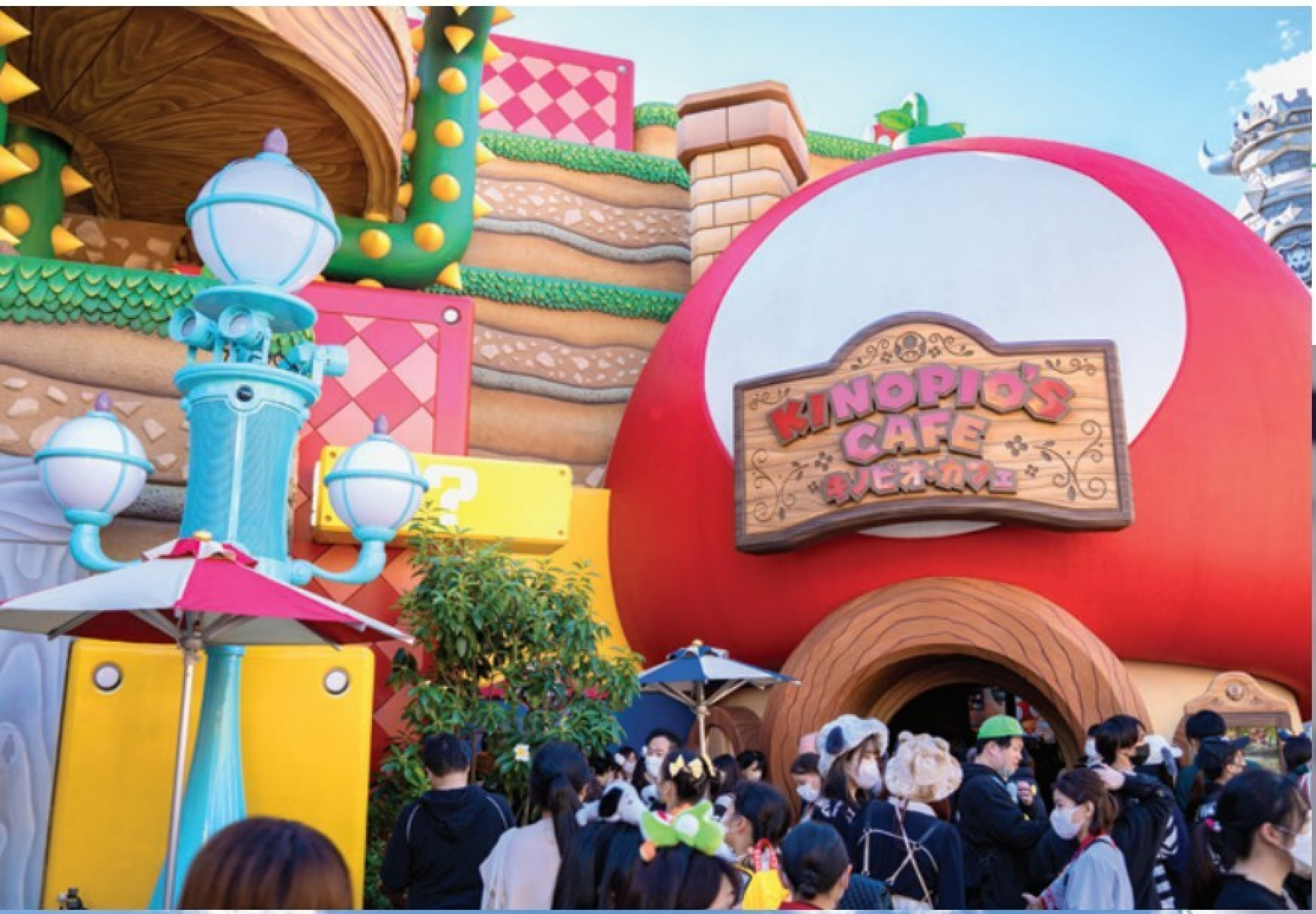
Kinopio's Café features all kinds of Mario-themed food items, including this Question Block Tiramisu



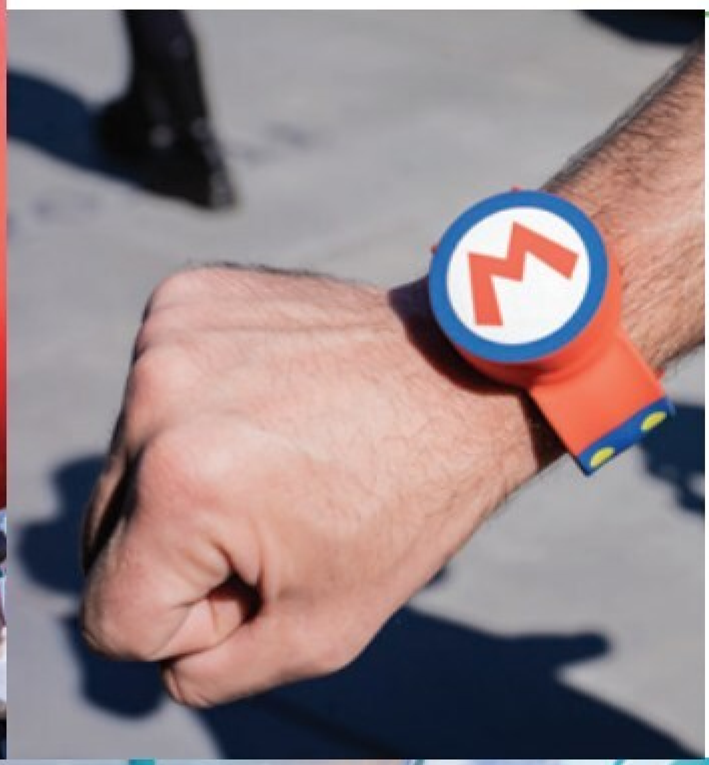
By linking your wristband to the Universal Studios Japan app, you can track your progress through Super Nintendo World. Here, you earn stamps for visiting certain attractions, coins for bashing blocks, and keys for completing minigames

SUPER
NINTENDO
WORLD
スーパー・ニンテンドー・ワールド

Those entering Super Nintendo World are greeted by a photo op with the color sign and a giant warp pipe serving as the park's enterance

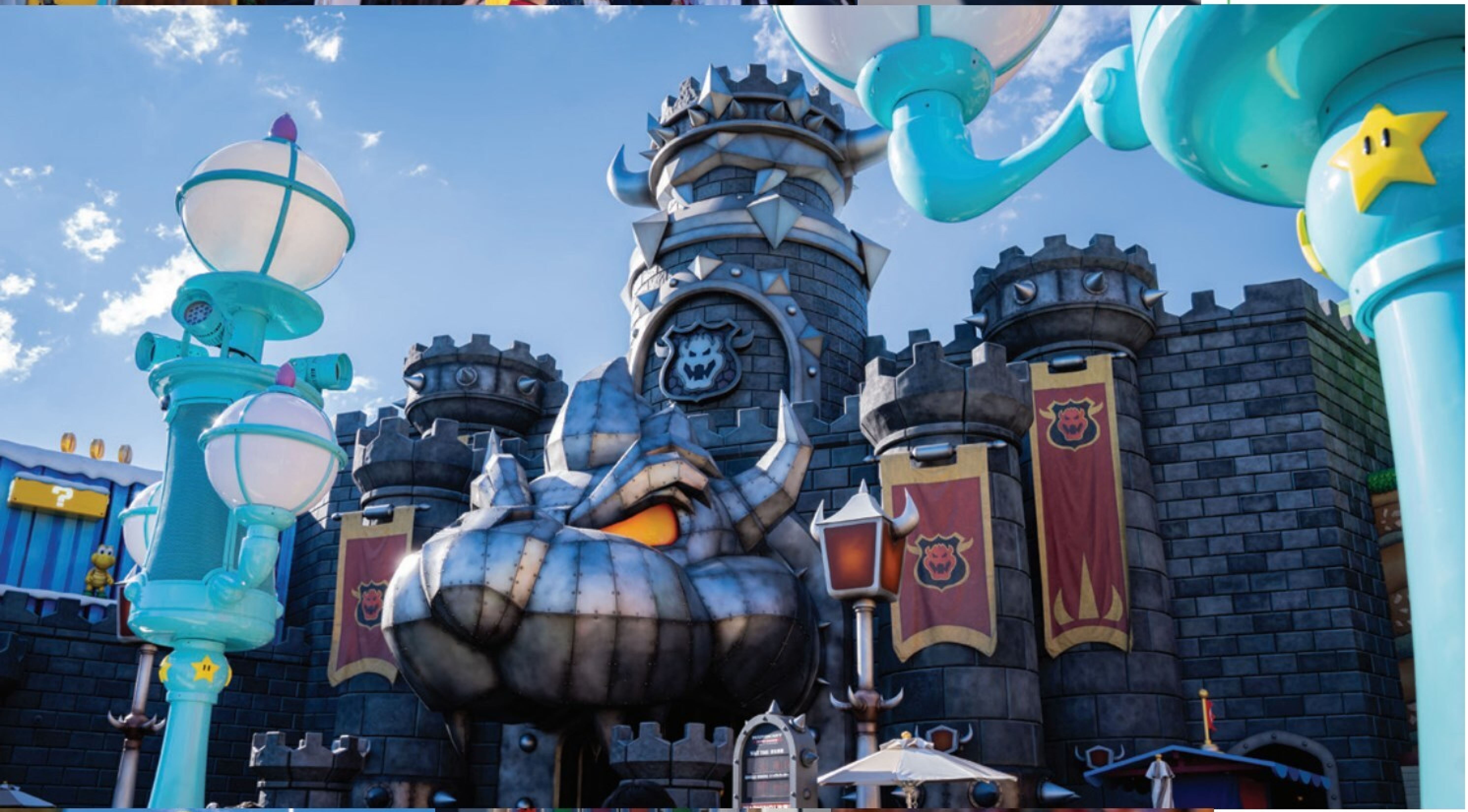


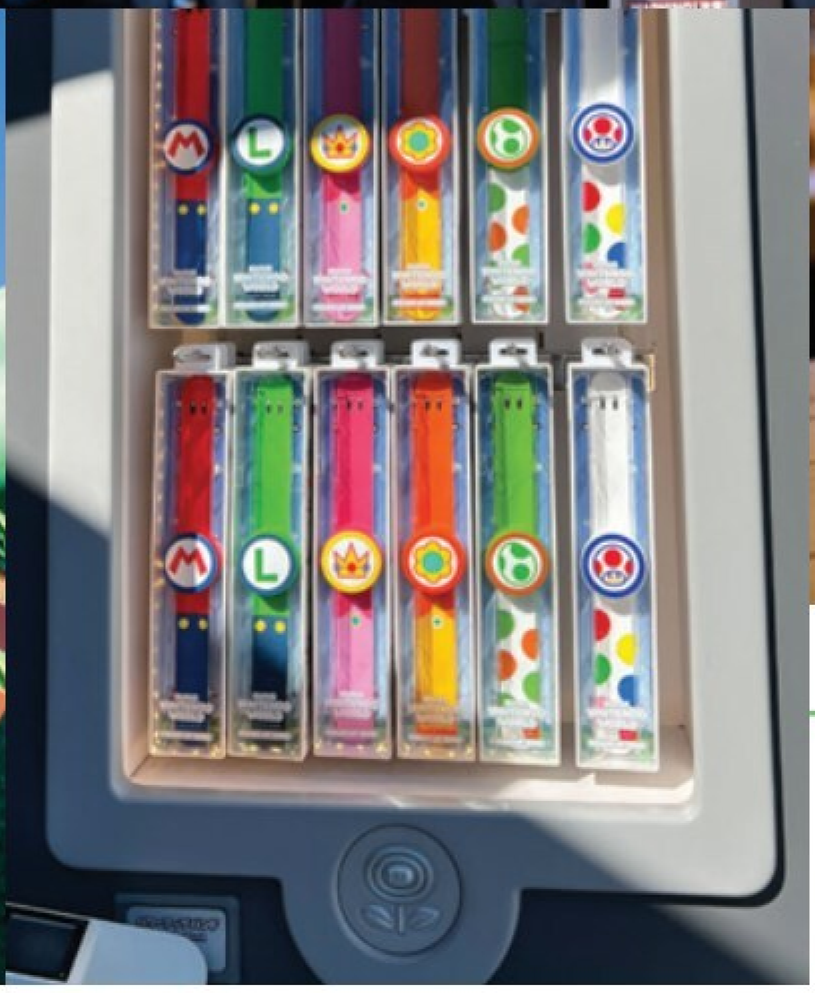
Toad's name in Japan is Kinopio. Super Nintendo World features a restaurant run by Toads called Kinopio's Café, which had some of the longest lines in the entire park

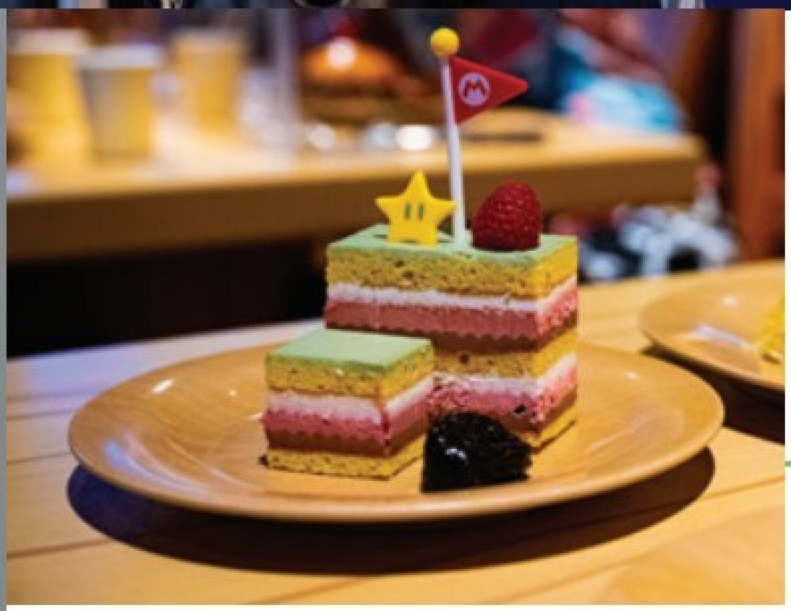


Though they cost extra, we recommend picking up a wristband, as several in-park activities require them

Bowser's Castle is one of the cooler buildings in the area, and it houses Mario Kart: Koopa's Challenge – the best ride in the park



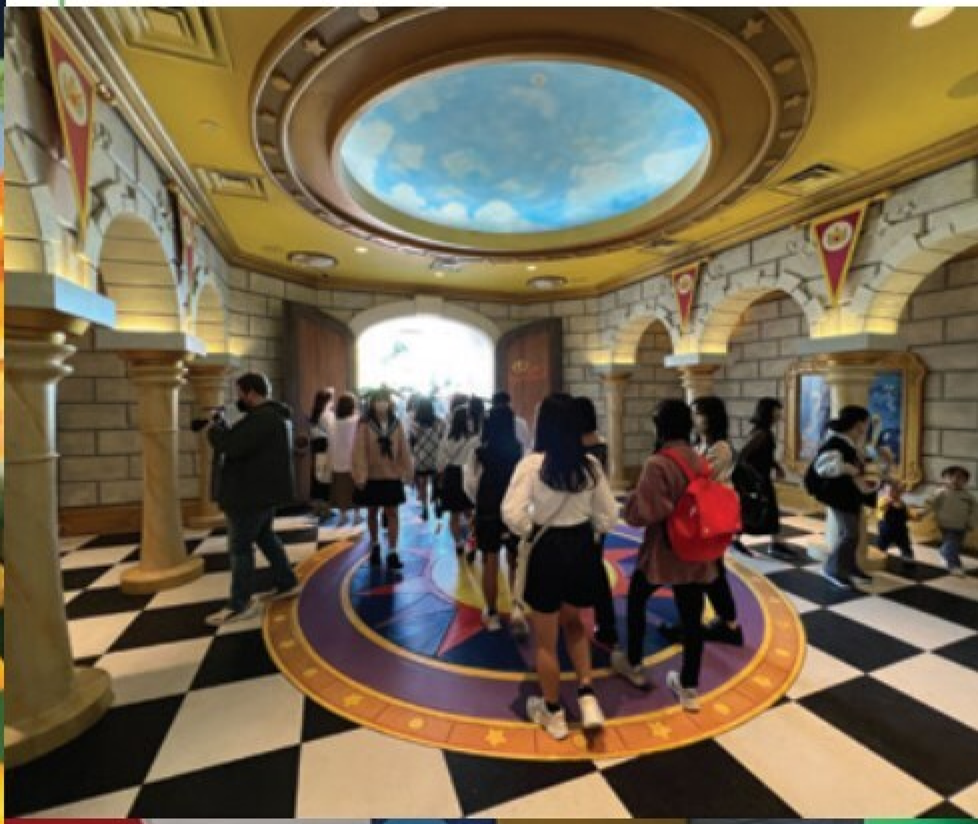


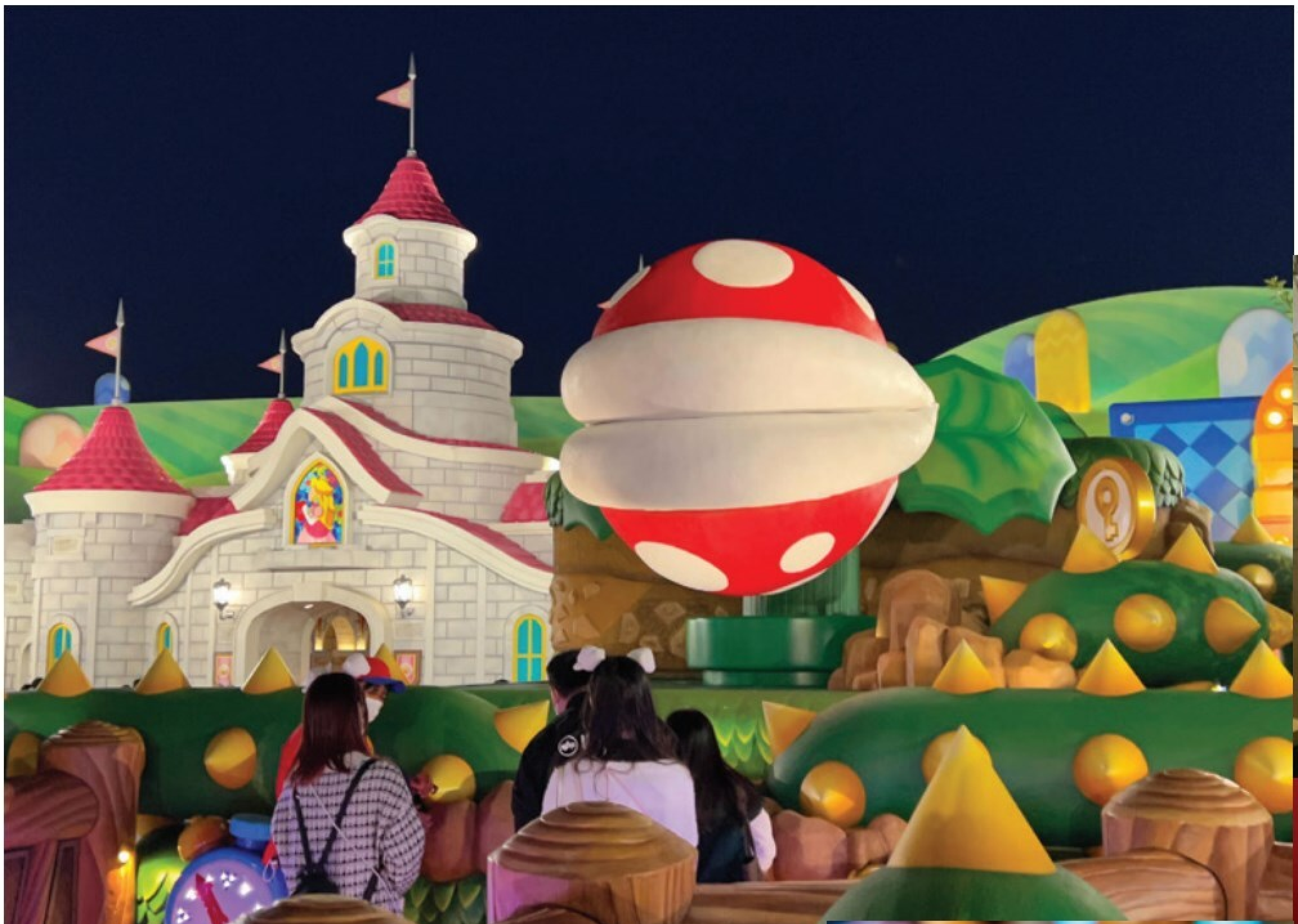


This Goal Pole Cake was the perfect way to end our Kinopio's Café meal

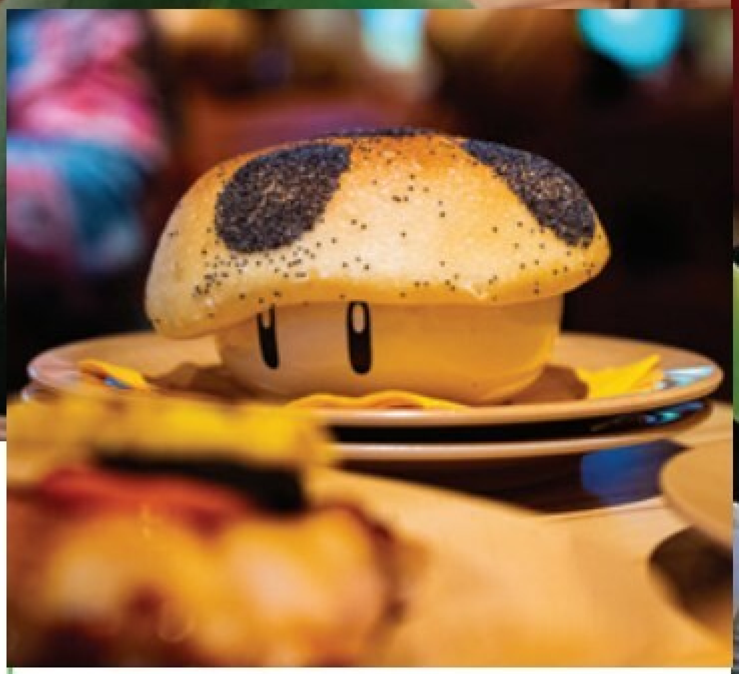
When you enter the park, you choose from several character-themed wristbands

The giant warp pipe at the entrance drops you right into the lobby of Peach's Castle, complete with paintings of Bob-omb Battlefield and Tiny-Huge Island from Super Mario 64



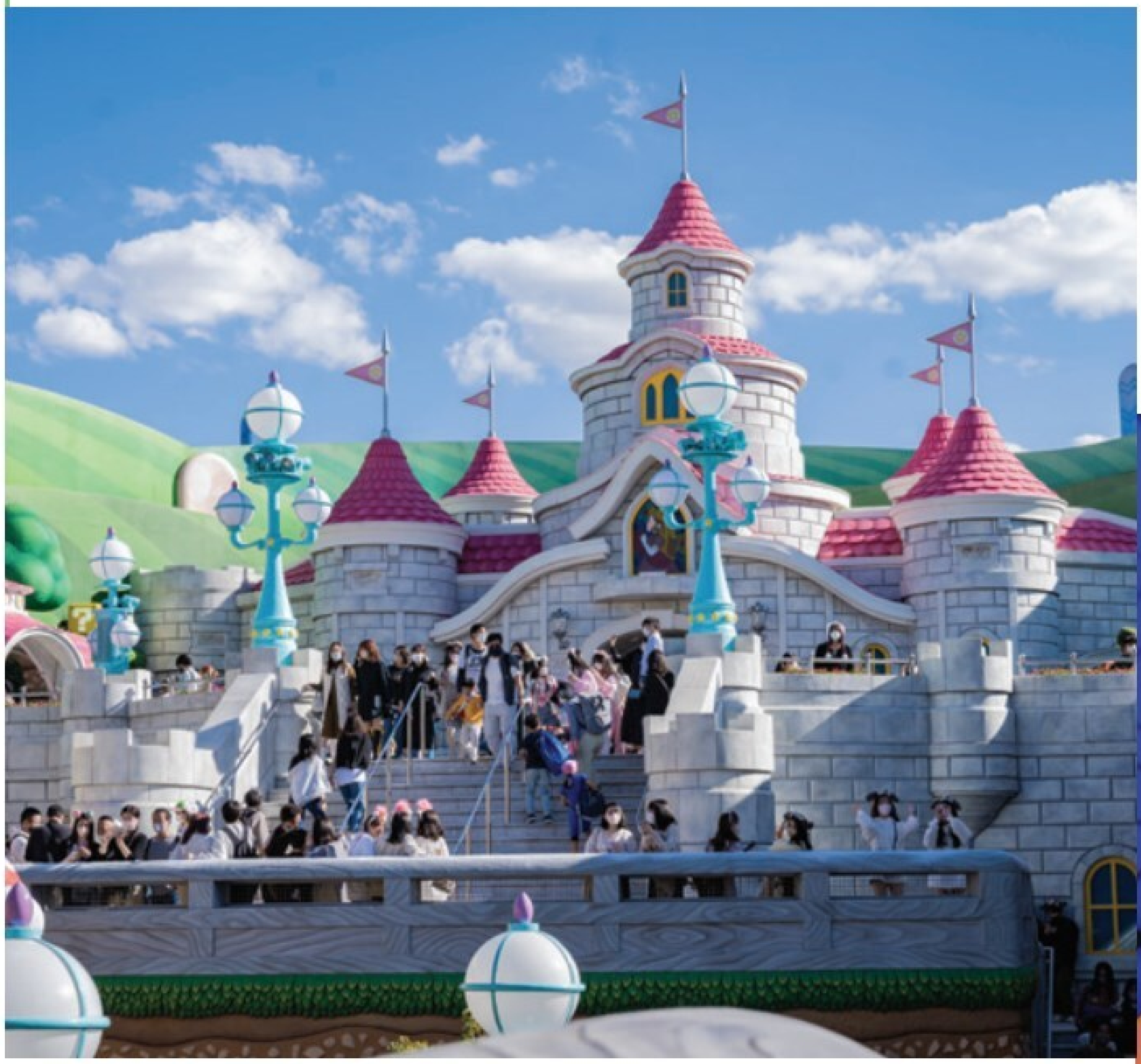


The sun may have set on Super Nintendo World, but we had minigames to complete, such as this one where we needed to turn off ringing alarms before it woke this giant Piranha Plant

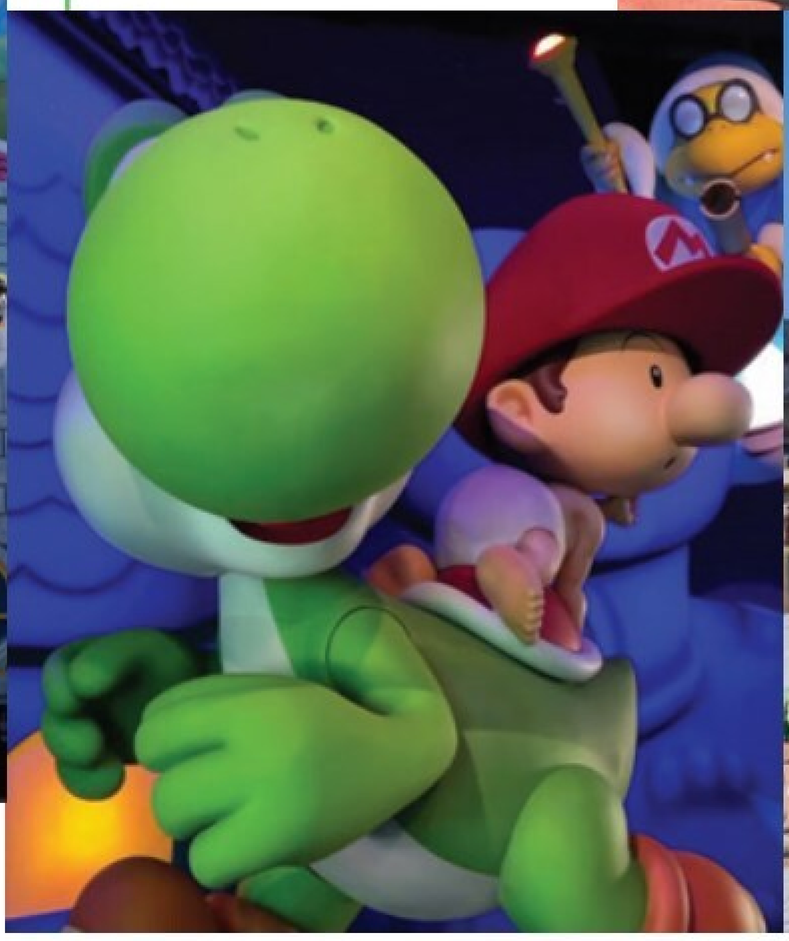


This Super Mushroom Pizza Bowl didn't make us get any taller, but eating it after a long afternoon of exploring the park, we felt like we had earned an extra life

Though we entered through Peach's Castle, we loved seeing it from the outside throughout our time in Super Nintendo World



While on the slow-moving Yoshi's Adventure ride, you encounter several characters, including Baby Mario and Kamek



The inside of Bowser's Castle looks exactly how you would imagine, complete with a giant stone monument to King Koopa himself

YOSHI'S ADVENTURE
ヨッシー・アドベンチャー

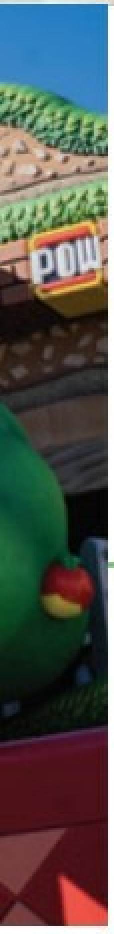
The Yoshi's Adventure ride is more of a moving tour than an actual ride, but it is still fun to become immersed in Yoshi's world

POW
YOSHI'S ADVENTURE
ヨッシー・アドベンチャー

After you exit Peach's Castle, this stunning recreation of Mount Beanpole from Super Mario 3D World is the first thing that catches your eye

The mixed-reality Mario Kart: Koopa's Challenge ride stands out as the best attraction in Super Nintendo World

We ran into some familiar faces immediately after landing in the Mushroom Kingdom



The entire park is full of impressive animatronics of recognizable characters like Yoshi, Shy Guys, Goombas, and Piranha Plants

The interior of Kinopio's Café is impressive and features several scenes that play out through the digital windows of the restaurant

The final boss battle (after you complete enough minigames in the park) is against Bowser Jr. ■

Cooking Up Puzzles In Venba

Solving familial problems of immigration through familiar food

BY SANIYA AHMED

Venba is a narrative cooking game following the life of an immigrant family moving to Canada in the 1980s. The mother, Venba, tries finding comfort and connection through food by restoring her family's lost South Indian recipes.

For me, feasting on South Indian food prepared by my parents and learning their cooking techniques reminds me of the home we've moved far from. After seeing Venba's similar, strong connection with cultural food as an immigrant, I spoke to the game designer, programmer, and writer Abhi of Visai Games to learn how South Indian cooking translates to players.

Players help Venba recreate recipes that are meaningful to her, but how does the game create that sense of familiarity for those unfamiliar with this type of food?
I think that was one of the biggest challenges with the game because you play as an expert cook. We talked to a bunch of chefs and people who are hobbyist cooks who really know these recipes. When I first made the puzzle and showed it to them – usually a puzzle [in Venba] starts with you looking at the recipe that's [partially damaged] and then you try to mess around with things – [a chef] just looked at the broken recipe, and without going to the actual game, she just solved it because she knows the recipe. If I balanced it for her to make it harder for her, then people who don't know the recipe stand no chance. It just goes back to basic puzzle design – you start with all the information you need, and you know where you need to get to, but you don't know how to get there.

The first level in the game, you make idlis [savory steamed rice cakes]. As I was doing research, I found out that back in the day – like in the '70s or '80s – people used to make idlis just a little bit differently. They used cloth, and the batter plates were quite different. That required placing the objects in the cooker in a certain order and certain rotation, so we were able to convert this cooking into a puzzle.

Venba obviously knows how to make idlis, but she doesn't quite know how to make it exactly like her mom does. That's the problem that the players are solving. It just boils down to, hopefully, good puzzle design where you have enough hints in the recipe, the tools, and the dialogues that Venba says.

Immigration is a life-changing moment for family and food. I've heard stories of immigrants, from the '70s and '80s, that had to substitute ingredients from what was available locally. Is that something Venba struggles with?
We don't touch on this explicitly, but one way we try to do this is Venba's story. It starts from the '80s, and it ends in the late 2010s, actually. Every level, the time moves forward quite a bit. You get a snapshot of where the family is at, how the relationships between each other, and the relationships with food, [have] changed across all these levels.

The Toronto I live in now compared to the Toronto that I lived in 10 years ago is dramatically different in terms of the resources that I have access to, like all these South Asian stores. As she gains more access to that – and we acknowledge it in the game – she makes little comments. The recipes also get more complex because it's finally allowed to get more complex. You can make things just like back home. You can get the same cuts of fish and stuff like that as the levels progress.

What emotions is Venba aiming at provoking from the player as they cook these recipes?

She struggles with a lot of guilt for leaving India and coming here [to Canada] in the first place. The idea that you're leaving your country behind and you're going somewhere else, you're adapting to their culture, there is some guilt associated with that – she's leaving behind her parents.

Then her guilt is exaggerated when she has a son here, and he grows up assimilating – like when her son is not fluent in Tamil. For her – in her son's life – food is that bridge. I think it's [the same] in a lot of immigrants' life. For me, even though I've been here a long time, I can fit in back home pretty easily, but I can't say the same for my friends here. They might not keep up with what's going on back home, but the one thing that does find the way to them is food. That's what food means to Venba when she cooks.

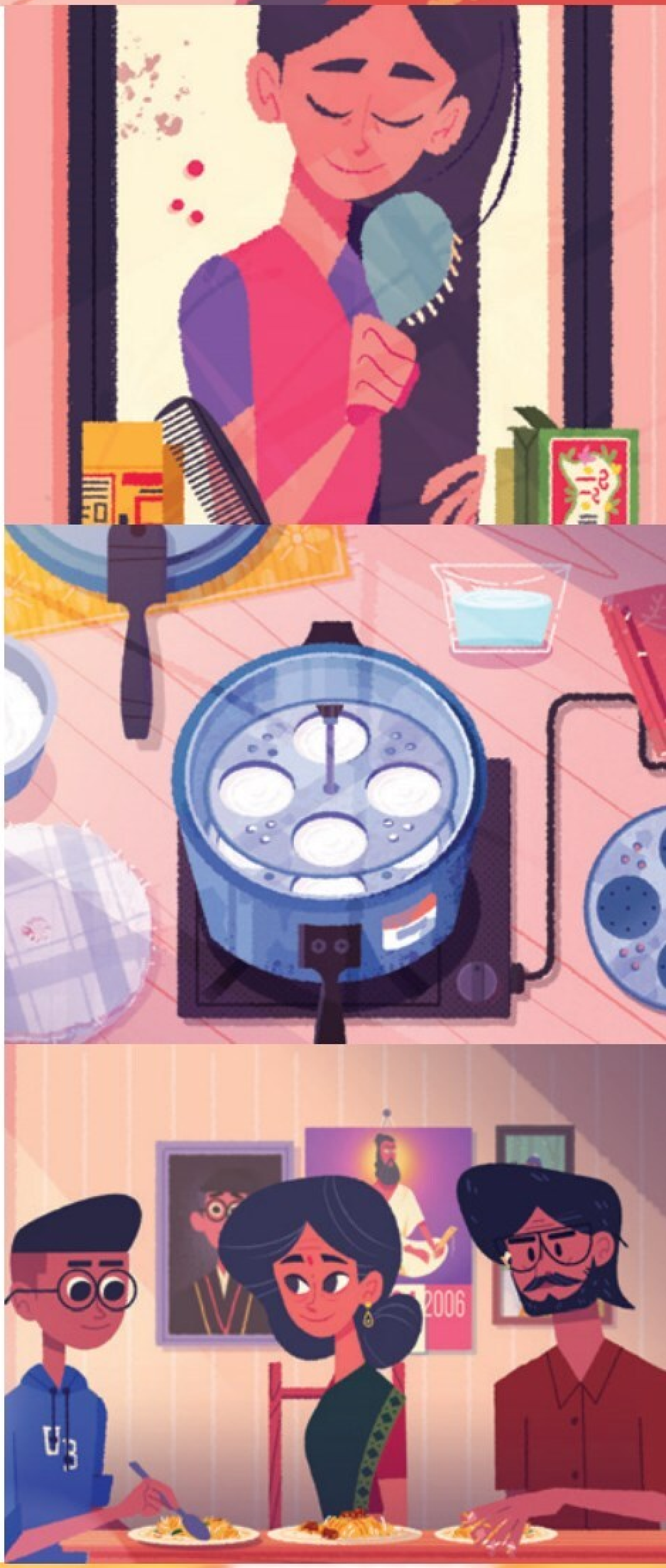
Are there recipes you're excited to share with players?

I had to pick what recipes make for good puzzles, so one of the first things that got cut was my favorite thing to eat because it didn't make sense to include in the game. I'm trying to include a broad stroke of things, but that being said, there's a level where you cook a bunch of different things, like a montage almost. Back home, you can order something called a meal which you get in a [banana] leaf. You get rice and a bunch of different things. There's not that leaf, but there is an homage to the meals and what goes into preparing something like that. That's really fun to order and fun to eat.

Some recipes can be complex; I saw a gif showing a memory flashback to help players "remember" the recipe. Are the recipes – the Hyderabadi dum biryani, for example – simplified for the game?

It's one of our more complex levels in the game, and it was so complex that to make it game design-proper, it forced me to come up with that memory gif that you saw because it gave visual clues instead of logical clues. It is simplified in the sense that, do I start it at the point where you're grinding up spices from scratch? Instead, it starts with a bit of the prep made for you; the rice is already parboiled and half-cooked. When I make dum biryani, which is one of my favorite things to make, the fun comes from the layering. That's what I try to do; what makes the recipe fun for me to cook. I try to capture that in the game design. ■

Venba will be released for Nintendo Switch and PC in spring 2023



BACK ALLEYS AND SIDE STREETS

The Tango Gameworks devs fell back in love with their city during the development of Ghostwire: Tokyo. We toured the real-life locations that inspired them

BY BLAKE HESTER

Masato Kimura (left) and Kenji Kimura (right)

↓
This article includes map coordinates for most of the major landmarks we visited. Type them into Google Maps to get a street-view look at our path through Shibuya

YOU COULD WALK PAST THIS SECTION OF SIDEWALK a million times and not think about it once. It's a 15-foot patch of concrete the same as the 15 feet ahead of you and the 15 feet behind you. No different than the 100 feet beyond that. It's nothing.

Until you look around, then, all of a sudden, you can see through time.

I'm standing in the Shibuya ward of Tokyo, Japan, which, if it's famous for anything, is its crosswalk, Shibuya Crossing, a massive scramble intersection allowing foot traffic to cross in all directions. For lack of a better analogy, you could call it Japan's Times Square. You've seen it in everything about modern Japan ever.

Shibuya Crossing (35°39'34.7"N 139°42'02.1"E) feels like the future. Hundreds of people – maybe thousands, depending on the time of day – all walk at once while massive, animated billboards blast light and sound in every direction. Skyscrapers dominate the skyline – some no more than just a few years old, and plenty more being built all around. One of the world's nicest, cleanest, and most modern subway systems takes millions of passengers to and from each day. Every single amenity, convenience, or vice you could want is no more than a few feet away at all times.

But I'm not there; I'm a block away, standing on this boring patch of sidewalk (35°39'37.5"N 139°42'03.3"E), seeing the past with Kenji Kimura and Masato Kimura (no relation), a director and producer, respectively, at Tango Gameworks. We're looking down a connecting alleyway at an old tunnel allowing pedestrians to walk under the train lines. It's full of bikes, covered in graffiti, and especially compared to all the high-end shopping on the other side of the street; it looks remarkably old and dingy. It's captivating. A glimpse at what this area used to look like decades ago (the earliest picture I found dates to 1951) before the world around it evolved and modernized. For whatever reason, this tunnel stayed the same.

Kenji and Masato helped lead the development of Tango's most recent release, Ghostwire: Tokyo, an open-world game based in Shibuya. In fact, this tunnel is in the game, a block away from Shibuya Crossing, just like in real life. Ghostwire isn't a horror game, but it is spooky, dealing with the supernatural and the weird. This juxtaposition of old and new, the way the unordinary (the tunnel) sits next to the ordinary (the expensive buildings around it), strikes at the heart of what these two find so appealing about Tokyo.

"That's the ordinary world; that's the unordinary world," Kenji says, pointing at both sides of the street. "They're so close together, but the appeal is in the unordinary that sits so close to it."

Masato adds to Kenji's thoughts, saying, "It's that spookiness. That mysteriousness that you feel on the unordinary side [...] when it's so close to the ordinary like this."

For the next few hours, Kenji and Masato are my tour guides through Shibuya – from the flashy lights and loud sounds to the hidden temples and seedy backstreets, they show me the vast contrasts of the area, telling me how it all made its way into Ghostwire.

And it all starts with our first steps through the tunnel, into the unordinary.

Tucked Away

On the other side of the tunnel, we find ourselves in the post-war Showa Era, in Nonbei Yokocho (35°39’36.6”N 139°42’05.3”E), or “Drunkard’s Alley” – which is actually two alleys, but nevertheless. Nonbei Yokocho is a densely packed section of dozens of tiny bars packed into long, narrow developments, mostly sharing the same roof. Notably, the bars are so small (only allowing a few customers at a time) that they don’t all have bathrooms. A handful of small bathroom stalls are along the alley’s streets.

Nonbei Yokocho’s history dates back to immediately after World War II when food cart operators set up their stalls in the area. In 1951, the tenements I’m currently looking at were built when those operators were given small 100-square-foot pieces of land. While only a small number of original bars are left, some patrons have been coming to Nonbei Yokocho for decades. In 2021, the area celebrated its 70th anniversary.

Nestled tightly between the train tracks and all of the high rises and redevelopments engulfing it, Nonbei Yokocho feels like the past hanging on for dear life – even if, as Kenji points out, parts of the surrounding area have already been lost to time.

“The city changed so quickly while we were developing [Ghostwire Tokyo],” he says before turning his attention to the neighboring redevelopment, which used to be an outdoor park area full of trees and bike parking. Now it’s the entrance to a shopping mall. “It used to be big; it used to go all the way down here. [...] We had to change a lot of stuff because of the way construction kept going and going and going. It’s the same with the train station, too. The location of the ticket gates was changing constantly.”

Like most major cities, Tokyo is experiencing rapid redevelopment; many historical and iconic landmarks, such as Harajuku Station and Nakagin Capsule Tower, have been torn down and replaced with modern buildings. In Japan’s specific case, there is a fairly good reason to tear down old buildings; the nation experiences more earthquakes than any other country. Laws put forth over the last few decades require new buildings to meet strict guidelines for remaining structurally sound during major quakes. It’s hard to imagine Nonbei Yokocho’s old bars staying intact through an intense earthquake; it’s probably safe to assume the buildings here don’t meet the most recent building guidelines.

However, it also means that Japan is losing parts of its physical history; changing with the times means deciding what parts of your past to get rid of. But in 2022, when areas like Nonbei Yokocho do still exist, it creates a fascinating mismatch between past and present.

“It’s not very planned out, ‘This section will be new, this section will be old,’” Masato says. “It’s just the way the different mixed pieces are glued together [that] makes Tokyo feel like it’s welcoming to all these different ideas.”

To that end, when creating Ghostwire’s world, the team decided not to make a carbon copy of Shibuya. Of course, Tango created certain parts one-to-one, but as Kenji tells me, most of the developer’s philosophy was finding ways to create a game world that felt representative of all the different flavors of the area. To cut down on having to constantly remake portions of the game’s map as new things were built around the city, Tango set Ghostwire in August 2020, creating an artist’s rendition of that specific time and place.

“We gave up on making a complete copy of Shibuya very early,” Kenji says. “Instead, we thought about how to make it more distinctive and interesting in our way. To deform it in a way that’s more interesting.”

“People in Japan seemed to have caught on [to] the distinctive portions of Shibuya that we were able to create,” he adds. “People would recognize those and say, ‘Hey, that is Shibuya! That feels like Shibuya.’”

As we walk on from Nonbei Yokocho, exploring the neighboring modern sidestreets and alleyways, a large red staircase at the back of a bowling alley stops Kenji in his tracks (35°39’36.4”N 139°42’11.0”E). The places you can’t go in Shibuya are the most appealing for him and the Ghostwire team.

“It makes you want to climb up there,” he says. Masato backs him up, adding vertical exploration was one of the pillars of Ghostwire’s development. Tango considered how it could utilize the city’s real-world architecture, incentivizing a desire to explore. The difference, of course, is that in the game, you can actually do it. In real life, we walk on, leaving the roof unexplored.

“It’s those kinds of locations that you walk by,” Kenji says.

Miyamasumitake Shrine

Kenji Kimura (left) and Masato Kimura (right) in Nonbei Yokocho

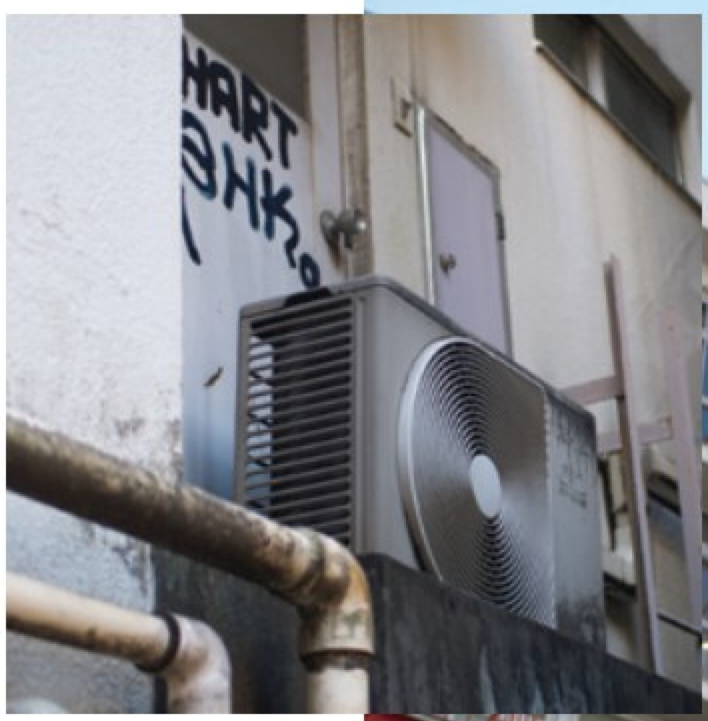
"It does tickle your curiosity; it does make you want to go in there. But you can't in real life because, in kanji, it says 'Employees Only.' If it's a game, you can."

Mere feet from the red stairs, another oddity stops the pair. Between two office buildings is a tiny alley, hardly big enough for a person to walk through; on the second floor is a door leading outside. But using that door, at best, would be a massive inconvenience (35°39'36.3"N 139°42'11.7"E).

"These are just crazy," Kenji says. "There's a ladder there to a small door that has an air conditioning fan just blocking the door. Even in the game, it might look like a bug to create architecture like that. But it's in real life!"

We end the first half of our tour at Miyamasumitake Shrine (35°39'35.4"N 139°42'13.9"E) – believed to have been built between 1673 and 1681. The shrine sits atop a high staircase sandwiched between two skyscrapers. Its nearest neighbors include a post office, a burger place, and a massage therapist. Shibuya is an astoundingly loud place; there's the normal city traffic, but also speakers constantly blaring music and advertisements. But up here, just feet away from the chaos on the street below, it's almost completely silent. We all have a moment to think and talk to each other at a normal volume. If you close your eyes, you could forget millions of people surround you.

It's a nice place to stop and catch our breath before stepping back into the chaos.



This one takes a bit of work to find, but changing the street view date to Nov. 2009 should get you there

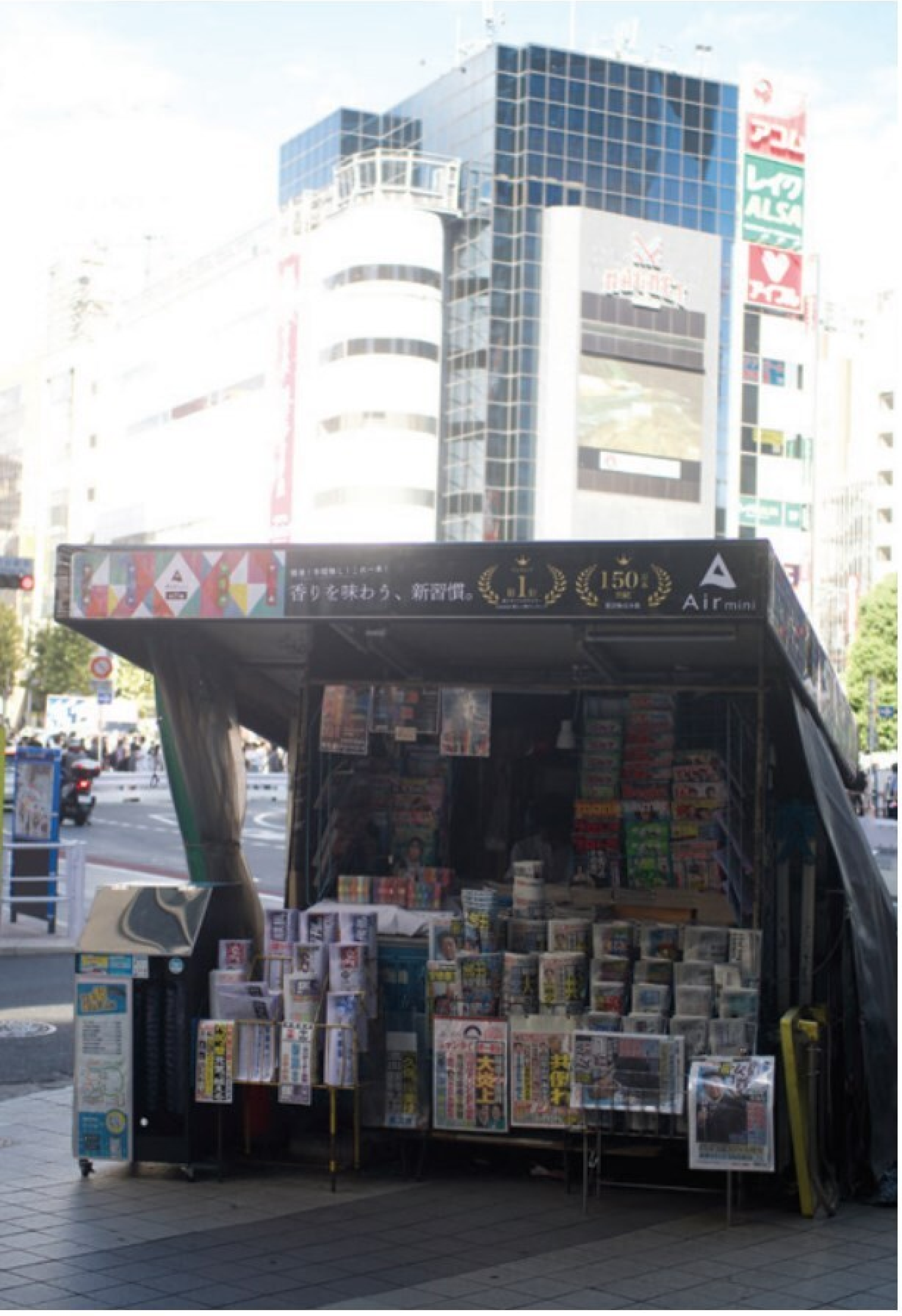
About Town

In Shibuya's Mark City building is Okamoto Taro's 98-foot-long painting "Myth of Tomorrow," depicting the moment the atomic bomb struck Japan during World War II. It's a portrayal of fire, death, and destruction. Per the Taro Okamoto Memorial Museum's website, it's also about "proudly overcoming even the cruelest of tragedies and giving birth to 'a myth of tomorrow.'" It sits just feet from Shibuya Crossing. A stark juxtaposition of death and rebirth slammed against high-end shopping and Boba Tea. No less chaotic, though.

"For me, it's not a political message that I take from it," Kenji says. "I take the power and energy that this artist is trying to express. I try to receive that power so that I can output the same."

Kenji says he comes here to reenergize himself. When he first started work at Tango on Ghostwire, he came here to receive Okamoto's energy. I'm not sure I personally receive any particular energy from the painting, but it is undeniably striking. We're in a shopping mall effectively, but the massive piece steals your attention. Looking at anything but its colors and twisting shapes is difficult. It takes me far too long to notice the hundreds of people trying to shuffle around us as we all stand in the middle of the walkway staring up at "Myth of Tomorrow."

This is Kenji's first time back to the painting since the game was released. Standing here, looking at Okamoto's masterwork – once thought to be lost in its original home in Mexico in the late '60s before being brought to Japan and restored in 2005 – I ask him how he feels.



↘
This newspaper kiosk in Shibuya Crossing showed up in Ghostwire: Tokyo as one of the nekomata stores

"It makes me feel like I want to do something new," he replies. "I want to do the next thing."

We, too, are onto the next thing – seeing the greatest hits of Shibuya landmarks that inspired Ghostwire.

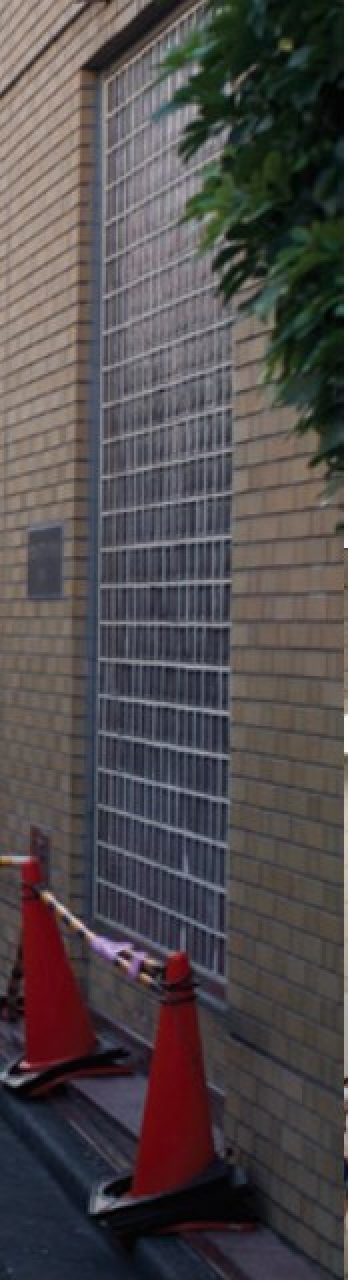
We leave and enter the sea of people around Shibuya Crossing. Kenji points out a small newspaper kiosk (35°39'32.4"N 139°42'00.5"E) directly outside of Mark City – an apparent hot spot for local graffiti artists. Its old, messy exterior makes it stand out in stark contrast to the sleek newness of everything around it.

"This kiosk here is very Shibuya for me," Kenji says as we walk by. "Even in the game, I felt that this shop should be exactly right here because it's so iconic. That's why we have a nekomata store [there] in the game." (The nekomata are the floating cat yokai that run Ghostwire's in-game shops)

Despite Tokyo's size and the fact that it's one of the world's more documented, photographed, and recorded cities, people here are strict about when and where you can take pictures. More than once on this trip, I get yelled at for taking pictures of something that wouldn't be a big deal anywhere else. Signs banning photography are everywhere. If you watch Japanese YouTubers filming outside, you'll notice the great lengths they often take to blur the faces of people walking by (it's easier these days since everyone is wearing a mask due to the ongoing pandemic).

This made capturing reference material for Ghostwire a bit of a problem. When developing a game, developers often shoot photos of real-world locations their game world is based upon. But doing that here, at best, can catch the ire of those around you. "They would stare at us in a very bad way," Kenji admits.

Ghostwire's specific take on Shibuya also created some unique challenges for gathering reference material. Namely, aside from the main character, Akito, and the yokai roaming around, Shibuya in the game is completely empty. Standing here, it's hard to imagine this place with nobody on its streets. But the Tango team had creative solutions.

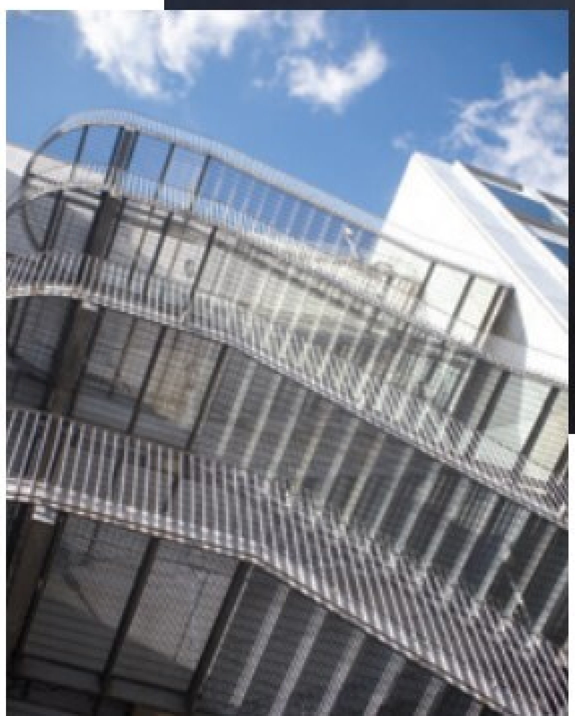


“Myth of Tomorrow”
by Okamato Taro,
located within Shibuya’s
Mark City building

カラオケ歌広場
オケ歌広場
渋谷センター街
消火栓
McDonald's
Welcome
SHIBUYA CENTER-GAI
Craft
SE MARKET
B1F
2·3F
atmos
客引きは犯罪です
FamilyMa

Right before dawn, the streets are relatively empty, Masato tells me. The team would come here to try and replicate Ghostwire’s empty setting as best it could. Kenji adds that the sound team would also come here in the middle of the night to capture Shibuya’s ambient sounds.

As we walk on, the two point out more landmarks they put in Ghostwire. There are obvious spots, like the Shibuya109 (35°39’34.6”N 139°41’57.9”E), a famous mall full of department stores catering to youth fashion. “It’s difficult for older men to walk into this building,” Kenji says, making Masato laugh. And the TOHO Cinemas Shibuya (35°39’33.5”N 139°41’55.1”E), which just barely made the cut. “We didn’t have it in the game initially, but we felt not having a movie theater there didn’t feel like it was Shibuya,” Kenji says. There are also the walkways connecting many buildings, specific streetlights, and even one exact staircase (35°39’33.3”N 139°41’53.7”E) connected to another shopping mall. “It’s very memorable; it made me feel like it should be in the game,” Kenji says.



Eventually, we turn away from the chaos and people down a mostly empty street full of two distinctly different (and somewhat similar, depending on how you look at it) things: sex and death.

As told by Tadayuki Horie, who's accompanying us and serving as translator, there's a lot of cemetery land around here. People don't want to live where cemeteries are, so businesses set up shop instead. In the specific part of Shibuya where we're ending our trip, that land was bought up for nightlife (35°39'33.7"N 139°41'46.9"E).

"Strip clubs, host clubs, hostess bars," Horie says. "[At] night time, you might not want to pull your camera out. A lot of yakuza businesses."

We're in the redlight district of Dogenzaka – or, as it's often called, "Love Hotel Hill." There are love hotels where you pay for a room by the hour, seedy bars, and stores advertising underwear and "uniforms" – and that they buy "used" clothing. Tango took reference footage here, too, Kenji says, but since they wanted a Teen-rated game, the seediness was toned down considerably.

Plenty of reputable-looking businesses are also here, such as a few music venues where Kenji likes to see shows. But nevertheless, it is a surprising little pocket of sin less than half a mile from Shibuya Crossing, with its massive Ikea and Starbucks. Compared to, say, Times Square, which was famously "cleaned" of all its adult theaters, sex shops, and the like in the mid-1990s before turning it into a tourist trap, here in Shibuya, mainstream consumerism and back alley activity seem to live together somewhat harmoniously. Or at least no one has gotten brave enough to kick out the landowners yet.

"The owners of the land are not the kind of people who are going to accept any of that," Horie says.

But perhaps more surprising than all of this being just a few streets over from an Outback Steakhouse is what's nestled right in the corner of all this sleaze: Chiyoda Inari-jinja Shrine (35°39'34.4"N 139°41'45.7"E), dating back (not in this specific location) to the 1400s.

"There's a sense of spirituality," Masato says. "These shrines are definitely sacred grounds that should not be removed or reduced."

"In most cases, there's a sense of the old stuff within the new," he says. "That keeps us hopeful and happy."

One of the alleyways of Nonbei Yokocho ↙

Chiyoda Inari-jinja Shrine, located deep within "Love Hotel Hill" ↓

Rediscovery

Everywhere we went today, everything we saw, all of it sits within less than a mile. If you want, you can make the same walk in about 15 minutes. Instead, it took us hours to explore this tiny little part of Shibuya, one ward in one of the biggest cities in the world.

As far as I'm concerned, the tucked-away secrets in alleyways and off-the-beaten-path side streets are the most interesting parts of exploring Tokyo. Everywhere you go, there's something to catch your interest and scratch your head over. But of course, I'm a tourist; this is all new to me. Everyone else mostly looks down at their phones, ignoring everything I find amazing.

Which makes sense; they see it every day. I don't walk around Minneapolis marveling at the same Trader Joe's I pass every day of my life, either. Even if you live in the best city in the world, once you fall into a routine, you stop paying attention to the good in a place. If anything, you start to focus on the negatives. When I think about it, all those sidestreets and back-alleys would be a massive pain to navigate each day if I was on my way to work; I'm certain I'd opt for the most direct path instead, and I'd stare at my phone the whole time I walked it.

Kenji is from Tokyo originally; he's lived here all his life. He used to come to Shibuya a lot as a student, and now he only lives one train station away. He knows the area well, seeing movies here twice a week, he says. But like anyone, after decades of living here, he stopped paying attention to all the unique parts of the city. Making Ghostwire, a game celebrating Tokyo, Tango had to go boots-on-the-ground, exploring the parts of the city its developers had long since ignored in their daily lives. At one point, Tango even rented a satellite studio in Shibuya while working on Ghostwire's storyboards so it could be right next to all of the real-world locations.

↙ The redlight district tucked near the lights and sounds of Shibuya Crossing, with signs prohibiting anyone under 18 from entering certain establishments

The team re-discovered its love for Tokyo, showed it to me, and in turn encouranged me to go out of my way to explore more of my city. Minneapolis may be smaller and less exciting, but I've found dozens of unique places and neat pockets I never knew existed. There's always something to find off the beaten path.

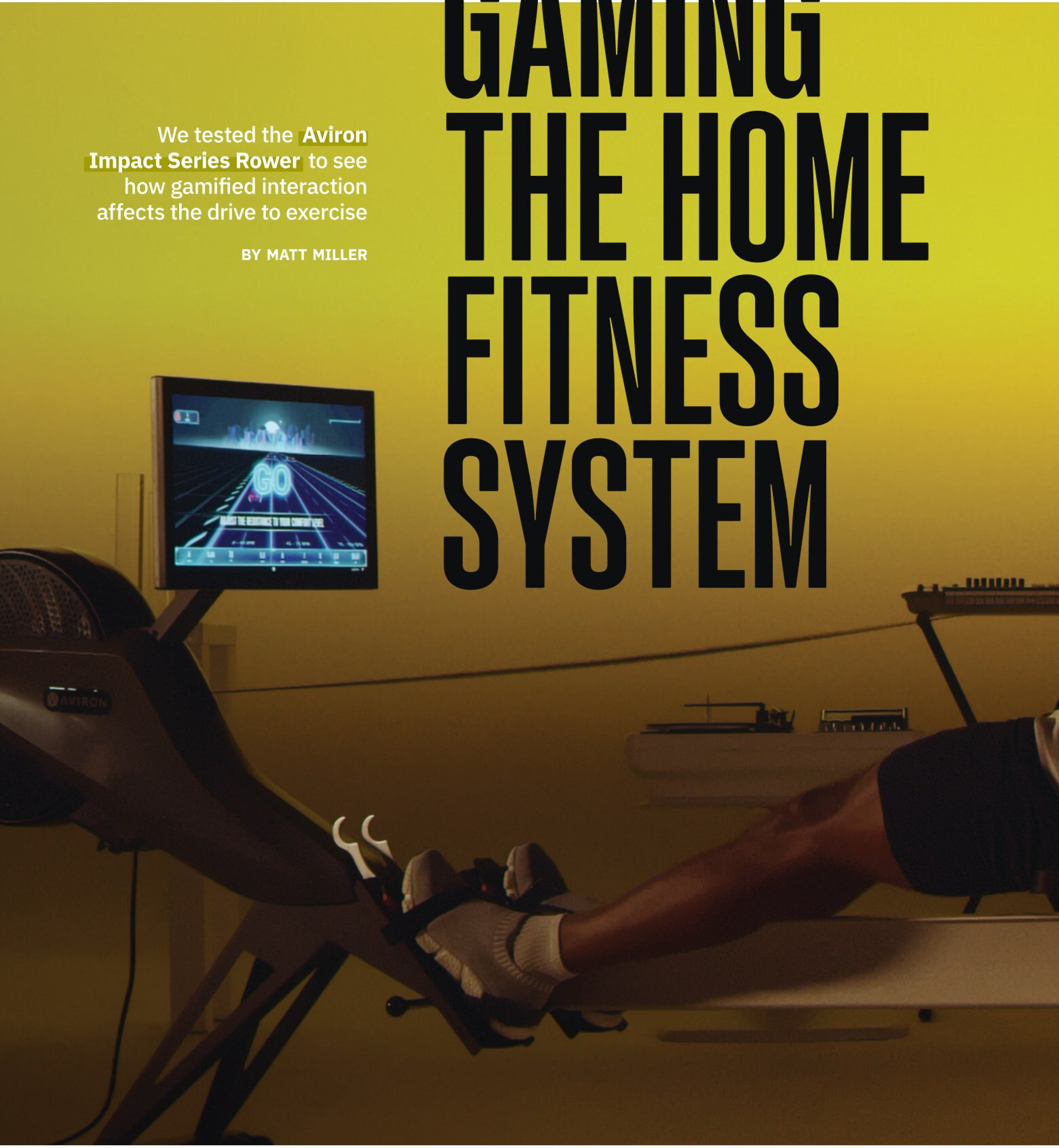
"When we were making the game, initially, we had a lot of those main streets – like we said, the daily, ordinary streets," Kenji tells me. "We tried to think about what kind of cool things we could do. But when we walked around the city, it's the smaller alleys where we felt our heartbeats go up, and we [started thinking] about all the cool things that might happen there. Since those were the things that were more exciting to us, we felt we could do more of those in the game. Definitely, by walking around the city, we were able to rediscover the cool things like that." ■

→ Masato walks amongst the sea of people in Shibuya

GAMING THE HOME FITNESS SYSTEM

We tested the **Aviron Impact Series Rower** to see how gamified interaction affects the drive to exercise

BY MATT MILLER


GO
ADJUST THE RESISTANCE TO YOUR COMFORT LEVEL
AVIRON

IN RECENT YEARS, A BEVY OF NEW FITNESS PRODUCTS have added new features to increase the appeal of sticking with your daily workout sessions. But few have found ways to leverage the most compelling aspects of gaming into the experience. Aviron's Impact Series Rower is an impressive step in that direction, offering a diverse selection of options to keep you entertained while you're sweating away the calories.

While its interactive app and screen are the most innovative aspects of Aviron's setup, the rower itself is impressive in its own right. It makes several nods to potential users who aren't into the exercise or rowing scene. The seat sits high at 20 inches, making it easier to get on and off. The magnetic and air resistance system is quiet, eliminating much of the loud "whoosh" sound that can be so annoying with many rowers. And importantly, the entire rower easily folds up and stores away. While it takes up a good bit of space when in use, its wheeled frame moves quickly and easily into a larger closet space when you're ready to have it out of sight. Performance during the workout is also strong, with smartly designed ergonomics that ensure a smooth pull on the handlebars as you glide back and forth along the monorail-style seating bar. Feet rests are secured comfortably against the footpads. I asked multiple testers of different heights to try it out, all of whom found it comfortable. The core pull and release motion feels natural, especially compared to many rowers I've encountered in public gyms. And resistance can be adjusted on the fly with a tap of the screen, which I appreciated.

Beyond its capacity as an excellent rower, Aviron's included screen and app give it something extra. The 22-inch touchscreen is effectively a large and attractive tablet. It's affixed above the flywheel, and can pivot vertically for your preferred viewing angle. A decent set of speakers serves admirably, or you can connect your preferred Bluetooth or wired headset if you'd like additional audio clarity.

You can access basic stats and rower functionality through the touchscreen without any additional fee, including info like distance rowed, calories burned, and elapsed time working out. You also gain access to the first of several gamified aspects of the experience, including adding and following friends and earning achievements for your daily fitness work. It's a handy display, and the achievements are a slick way to encourage use, but it probably doesn't justify the cost of the machine, at least until you opt into the $25 monthly membership.

If you choose to make that jump, that's where the Aviron rower comes into its own, layering in many additional ways to engage and enjoy your time exercising. You gain access to an array of exercise classes and guided workouts, selectable each time you sit down for a session. You also can access virtual scenic rowing experiences, featuring real-world locations where you're cutting through the water as you pull on the "oars," with the video speed timed up to match your strokes. Exploring a tropical bay or a distant secluded river from the comfort of your basement is lovely. You can also log into your preferred streaming channels, including Netflix, Disney+, Prime Video, Spotify, and YouTube, and catch up on your latest show.

For our readers, the most exciting option might be Aviron's plentiful selection of arcade-style games. Set expectations accordingly; everything remains very simple, with only the pull of your oars as an input method. Even so, it's a fun and distracting option to take on the simple shooters and adventures on offer. With over a dozen games, there's enough variety that you're unlikely to tire quickly of the possibilities. I liked the twist on Breakout and its brick-shattering, and another game that supplied futuristic track racing. I also got a kick out of the Pros vs. Joes competition, which lets you compete in rowing against the likes of Olympians and other athletes, to see how you stack up. Many of the games and other activities also offer competitive options, so you can compete with other friends you make on the platform.

Whatever you get up to, the entire thing is smartly tracked on your profile and achievements are constantly popping up to reward engagement with your fitness efforts. Just like similar structured progression systems on more complex home gaming consoles, the presence of this tracking and point mechanics does wonders for encouraging engagement and pushing you on to the next goal.

The biggest hit against Aviron's gamified fitness experience for most users is likely to be the price of admission. Between the initial machine purchase and monthly membership, it's a significant investment. However, the Impact Series Rower impressed me with its nods to approachability in use for even non-fitness enthusiasts, and I suspect many will find the impressive collection of entertainment and workout options far more appealing than a monthly gym membership and the hassles that come with it. Aviron is on to something with its interactive approach to fitness, and regular updates show me the company is continuing to iterate on the experience. If you've been looking for a way to enjoy your workouts with a touch of gaming mixed in, it's an easy recommendation. ■

$2,199 | ***avironactive.com***

CONTROL UPGRADE

New options for tweaking your PS5 play experience **BY MATT MILLER**

❶ VICTRIX PRO BFG

HPDP has supplied some excellent controllers of late, and this new PS5, PS4, and PC-compatible pad continues that trend. Other controller brands sometimes tout their modular qualities, but I've yet to encounter one as flexible as the BFG. Left-stick/d-pad positioning can be swapped. Three d-pads (diamond, PS-style, and Xbox-style), alternate analog sticks (short convex and tall convex), wireless or wired play, and tweakable throw distance on the triggers are all options. You can even trade out the right-face analog and four-button for a six-button setup for the next fighting game tournament you hit up. The rubberized grips feel solid in hand, and the four mappable back buttons offer up to three profiles. The absence of rumble and adaptive triggers is a loss, but if that's not a big factor for you, the BFG offers just about every other option you might want.

$180 | *pdp.com*

❷ DUALSENSE WIRELESS CONTROLLER (NEW COLORS)

One of the challenges in shopping for a new PS5 controller is that Sony created such a great pad right out of the gate. The DualSense, with its excellent hand-feel, adaptive triggers and vibration, and tight control, all make it one of the better first-party controllers ever. If you're pleased with function but want an upgrade on style, Sony has begun to flesh out its choices, including a slick gray camouflage version and a limited-edition God of War Ragnarök option if you manage to snag one while it's in stock. It's hard to go wrong if you're looking for more flash or an additional option for local multiplayer. Just be aware; Sony is getting ready to roll out its high-end Edge controller in the coming weeks, so saving up for that is another way to go.

$70-75 | *direct.playstation.com*

❸ TACTICAL ASSAULT COMMANDER MECHANICAL KEYPAD

For those who do the bulk of their gaming on PS5 or PS4 but who want the additional precision of keyboard play for MMOs like Final Fantasy XIV or shooters like Call of Duty or Fortnite, Hori's dedicated keypad is worth a look. The small footprint ensures you can place it on a sofa armrest or other limited flat surface. The adjustable palm rest allows for different hand sizes so that your fingertips fall ergonomically across the WASD keys. LED backlighting adds a little flash, but the assignable key functions, multiple available profiles, and solid key feel are the real selling points. Check title compatibility on Hori's site before buying and note that you'll need a USB mouse to plug in (sold separately). If you've got check marks in those categories, this solution should please a needy segment of the gaming population. ■

$130 | *stores.horiusa.com*

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Atrix Joy-Con Gaming Wheel for Nintendo Switch 2-Pack
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NEW BLOOD

BY MICHAEL LERI

HOW MORTAL KOMBAT 9 REINVIGORATED THE SERIES WHILE OVERCOMING A BANKRUPT PUBLISHER AND UNDERWHELMING PREDECESSOR

MORTAL KOMBAT WAS NOT SUPPOSED TO DIE.

Many regard Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe as one of the lowest points of the series. Its minigame-centric fights and awkward movement were damning, but it also lacked the silly, over-the-top violence Mortal Kombat is known for – a sad reality for appeasing license holder Warner Bros. Batman can cripple impoverished criminals, but he can't be cut in half by Tarkatan blades.

It would have been disappointing to end on an ill-fated crossover, but Midway's untimely demise could have made that so. Layoffs, uncertainty, and publisher implosion aren't how franchises live; it's how they die. But the then-newly formed NetherRealm Studios reinvigorated the entire franchise after its darkest period with one of its most beloved entries: the 2011 reboot, Mortal Kombat 9.

MKvDC rebooted the series in a way but holding back the gore meant another entry could benefit from all the pent-up aggression. The natural progression was not lost on the people behind it, as series co-creator Ed Boon says going for a T-rating meant the next game could fully push the series' signature violence.

"The biggest lesson we learned with MKvDC was that there was an opportunity for two separate games that each could embrace their roots without compromising the other," Boon says. "This resulted in us deciding that the next Mortal Kombat game would be a full reboot and aggressively embrace everything signature about Mortal Kombat. This included going back to a 2D fighting plane, retelling the [story of the] original trilogy, and going back to our classic Fatalities without restrictions."

Other team members echo the sentiment, as it seemed abundantly clear to those making it that the series shouldn't be divorced from its violent roots.

Avoiding an Inevitable Fatality

Going back to basics was a reasonable plan. But it got complicated when Midway filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy three months after MKvDC's release. Chapter 11 allows a company to continue operating, but it's not a good situation.

Senior FX artist Shawn Kawa was on the Mortal Kombat team during these tumultuous times. After about a year at Midway, he came into work and found that large swaths of the team were laid off, which he thought included him.

"I came into work, and everyone was packing up their stuff, and they said everyone was laid off," Kawa says. "And I thought, 'Well, I didn't last long.' But it's pretty normal in games. I packed up my stuff and went home. Later I got a call from my lead like, 'Oh shoot, we forgot to call you. We were going to tell you to stay home because everyone was laid off, and you're not.'"

Senior animator Richard O'Meara was also at Midway during these grim times. He was in a similar boat as Kawa, but got his ominous call just before the weekend. That was only the first wave of confusion rushing over Midway's employees.

"One of the leads at Midway Chicago called me on Friday and said, 'Don't come in to work on Monday,'" says O'Meara. "I was like, 'You're not making me feel good right now.' And he told me, 'Be happy I'm telling you to come to work on Tuesday.' Monday came, and I started getting calls from all my friends like, 'Hey, did you get laid off?' So he was telling me to stay away because they were going to have a mass layoff to compensate for the bankruptcy."

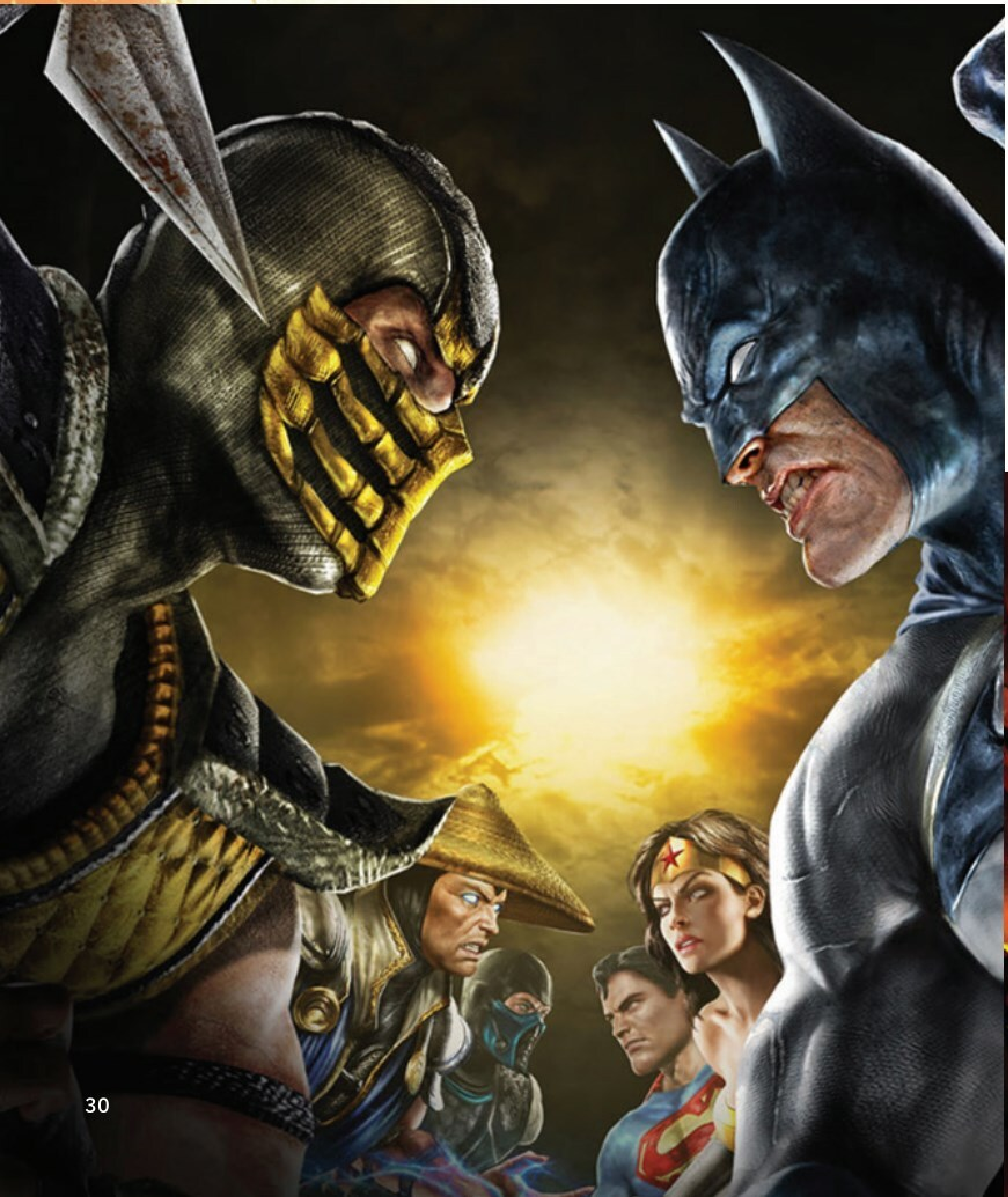
Director of engineering Alan Villani admits there was fear around the bankruptcy and the idea of splitting the team from Mortal Kombat.

"If your company is in bankruptcy, that's a serious thing," Villani says. "They were still paying our salaries, so there was no immediate threat that was going to stop suddenly, but there was a real threat that everything would go sideways if WB or whoever was looking at us didn't buy us. The IP could split from the team. That was a super tenuous point for the whole series. I can't even imagine if somebody just buys it and throws whatever team on it and says, 'Let's just make some Mortal Kombat games because we own the IP.' It could've been a disaster."

Villani says he was confident Midway Chicago would find a home despite the worries. The studio developed one of the most coveted fighting game series of all time, after all.

"Each person will have a different level of fear of what was going on," Villani says. "But I just knew that the team was so talented that there was no chance that somehow we wouldn't land somewhere. If it was Bungie, people wouldn't be like, 'What are you going to do? You don't have funding? Will you be on the street?'"

Villani's hunches were proven correct as Warner Bros. bought Midway in July 2009. The publisher wanted the team and the Mortal Kombat IP. Not all acquisitions go as smoothly, but WB had the foresight and money to make it work, Villani says. "Thank God WB had the money at the time and was looking to make purchases. And we were at a bargain-basement price."



BECOMING NETHERREALM

Midway Chicago became WB Games Chicago, bringing much-needed stability and better funding. While the extra support took many forms, the move to a new building was the most evident, given the old office's dire state.

Daanish Syed, a 2D cinematic associate artist on MK9, remembers the decrepit, leaky building when first interviewing at the company in early 2010. While the innermost parts were lovingly decorated with Mortal Kombat memorabilia, others looked like they were spat out of the actual Netherrealm.

"They called me in for an in-person interview, and I was so excited," Syed says. "I went to their old studio location, and it was this weird, industrial, nondescript building. I walked in, and it was even worse on the inside. Really dilapidated. It was awful. They showed me around, and despite the building being so old, it still felt alive and cool. But I just remember being taken aback, like, 'Wow, what is this place? It is so s----y looking!'"

O'Meara was much less kind.

"Midway's building was a total, total dump," he says bluntly. "I remember my first day there, I was like, 'They make Mortal Kombat here?' It was just this run-down, hacked-together garbage office. I remember sitting in the cafeteria with [Midway animator Jim Gentile], and I'm looking at this really gnarly kitchen, and I'm like, 'This is terrible.' It looked like a mechanic's cafeteria. Just really dilapidated and beat up.

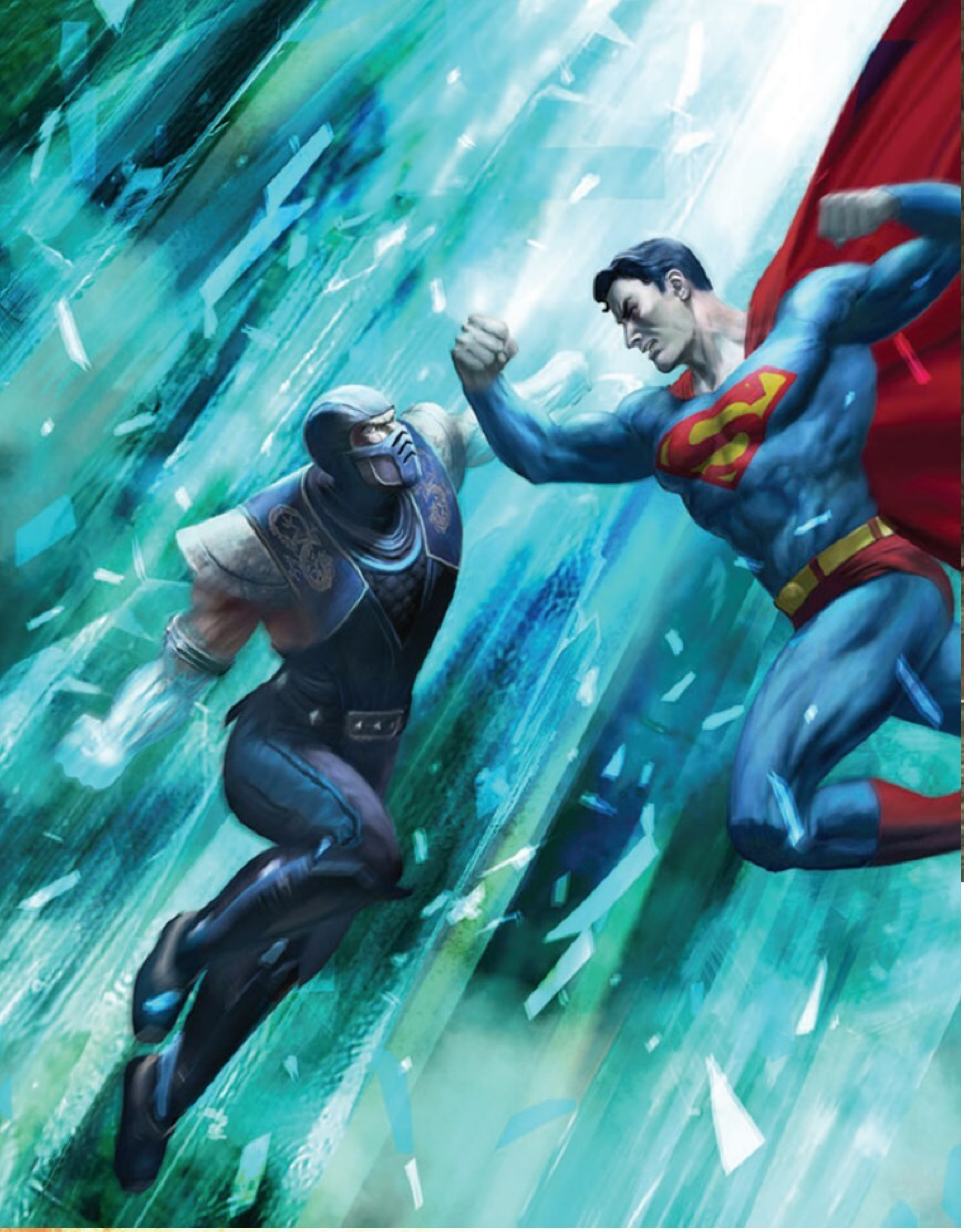
"The foam tiles had watermarks and mildew marks. And if you looked up, you could still see all the hardware in the ceiling of what they would use to build the pinball cabinets. They just painted it all black. It was the worst."

Midway Chicago rebranded to WB Games Chicago, and it was time to fully embrace its new identity and develop something more personal. And thus, NetherRealm Studios was born in April 2010.

MORE MONEY, FEWER PROBLEMS

Warner Bros. backed up the Chicago team financially and provided something nearly as beneficial: time. Midway had the studio pumping out Mortal Kombat games on a near-annual basis by the end. That cadence would have been hard to keep up in the HD era, but WB wanted a quality product, and the Chicago studio had gone in with the idea of spending more time on the game.

"The reality wasn't an extra year because [MKvDC released at the] end of 2008, and this game was the first few months of 2011," Villani says. "It's not really three years. It's important from the standpoint of the percentage difference of development time because



[the difference doesn't seem] that great. But it enabled us to do a lot more. Those extra months in game development are huge."

The additional time gave Villani's team more room to push Unreal Engine 3. Although it was a ubiquitous engine then, UE3 wasn't typically used for games running at 60 frames-per-second. As Villani puts it, "Unreal Engine 3 barely ran at 30 [frames-per-second] with nothing on the screen," an indictment showing how hard the engineers worked to fit it over the genre. MKvDC also targeted 60 frames on Unreal 3, but that was more of a test to get it to run.

MK9 was an exercise in pushing the tech. Villani says the team was always focused on building on what it had to help out its future self on the next project. And MKvDC was the "springboard" that let MK9 look as good as it did.

"If you look at what we did in MKvDC, and then you look at what we did in MK9, you can just see the tooling and support for the artists kept improving, and performance kept getting better," Villani says. "That's why you could see more details and liveliness. If you look at MKvDC, the main reason that was not as vibrant was because we didn't have the time."

Villani says players don't care about technical limitations and just want a pretty game. Mortal Kombat 9's lively backgrounds, full of buildings exploding and soul wells flaring up into the heavens, were all touches the studio added to give it the details of a game running at 30 frames. The studio wanted to have its cake and eat it, too.

Syed remembers the eye-catching visuals at an early stage during his interview. The game, which was over a year away, had glitched out and was frozen in place, but that technical mishap allowed him to soak it all in.

"The game had crashed during a match [with] Kung Lao versus maybe Raiden on the daytime Pit stage," recalls Syed. "It was frozen, and all I saw was Kung Lao in the middle of a jump kick or something. And even just that, I thought it looked amazing."

MK9's presentation was only part of its appeal. Fighting games love to indulge in nostalgia, and MK9's story provided that in spades with its all-star roster and iconic arenas from the first three games. With the leap in fidelity afforded by modern technology and the will to get back to basics, rebooting the original trilogy with a modern coat of paint was a natural starting point.

"We knew it was a perfect opportunity to present a true telling of the Mortal Kombat storyline in its full cinematic glory, better than we ever could before," Boon says. "That was one of the reasons why we decided to tell the [first three] stories over again. One reason why it worked so well was because it was presented like a 'real movie' but with the player participating in all of the fights. It felt like a perfect marriage."

Villani says Mortal Kombat has always focused on narrative. The RPG-like Konquest Modes and minigames like Motor Kombat and Puzzle Kombat were similar stepping stones to getting Mortal Kombat into a more

traditional campaign territory. Building upon those modes and emphasizing narrative just made sense according to Villani, but it also made the budget balloon.

"The one thing you could say about Warner Bros. is that they paid those bills," Villani says. "That was a lot of money. I don't even remember the exact amount of money we spent on that mode, but it was like a whole other game's worth. Not another MK game, but like a smaller game could have been made for that kind of money. How do you get people really jazzed to play this new fighting game? You give them a story mode that actually tells a compelling enough story and involves fighting. Simple pitch, but somebody has to pay for it."

A BLOODY GOOD REVEAL

Mortal Kombat 9's high cost extended to its extravagant E3 2010 reveal. NetherRealm draped The Los Angeles Convention Center in banners with tasteful silhouettes of Sub-Zero's famous spine-rip Fatality. The booth had an imposing dungeon covered in skulls and spikes, all with the series' logo hanging overhead. These attractions only helped reinforce what the game demos made clear: Mortal Kombat was back. Fans and critics praised the return to form, gawking at the bone-crunching X-Ray attacks and bloody finishers playing on televisions while waiting to play.

The reveal of Mortal Kombat 9 made for an impressive first E3 for Syed, who spent his teenage years downloading low-res trailers at home. He says it was an amazing event that let the developers unveil the game on their terms. After initially waiting in line to see his game like a fan, he rode on the crowd's energy.

"It was an absolute thrill to finally show it and the fan reaction was incredible," Syed says. "The Fatality we showed off at the theater presentation was one of the goriest: Kung Lao throws his hat on the ground like a spinning buzzsaw and then pulls the victim into it. It was an absolutely uproarious response. The 'oohs' and 'aahs' reacting to bloody violence, it was so awesome."

Boon says he was thrilled like Syed, but also anxious since a lot was riding on the reveal. WB's money and years of fan demand are sure ways to amp up the pressure.

"I remember E3 as being a combination of feeling very excited and equally nervous," Boon says. "There was a lot of anticipation for this game, and WB was really backing it with a strong PR and marketing campaign. The hype was really building, and we felt the pressure for the game to live up to it."

The nerves faded as people started going hands-on. While TVs were hanging on the outside, Mortal Kombat 9 was hidden away from the show floor, adding to the mystique. Boon says he felt bad people had to wait so long to see it, but once fans got inside, they went wild.

"Inside the theater was crazy," Boon recalls. "People were freaking out when they saw the new features and the crazy X-Ray moves on the gigantic screen."

AN IMPRESSIVE X-RAY EXAM

E3 2010 was a validation of what the newly rebranded team spent years working on in secret, but it still had 10 months to go. There are many stories of games that show well and then hobble to the finish line, only reaching greatness in their last few months (if at all). However, Mortal Kombat's development differed partially because of its genre and how NetherRealm builds characters and stages in waves.

This modular approach, where lessons learned from one batch are applied to the next, meant there wasn't a singular moment where it all clicked into place. With such an increased focus on quality and giving the studio more time, it was hard for the team to see it being anything but a success.

"I don't think there was an 'Aha!' moment with it like, 'Oh, this is gonna be a great thing,'" Villani admits. "It was like, 'How could this not succeed?' We're improving every dimension of this we possibly can. And it just got better over time."

Even with a stacked feature list, its X-Ray super moves stuck out. Like Street Fighter IV's Ultra Combos, a full meter would let players unleash a cinematic attack. But unlike Capcom's fighter, Mortal Kombat's super moves gave players a detailed look at the internal damage.

Crushing frozen livers and pulverizing groins were flashy ways that Mortal Kombat put its own spin on super moves, but this added another visual flair to a game already pushing itself. Boon says how he was satisfied with its execution yet didn't downplay how hard it was to implement.

"I can't tell you how many times we iterated on the presentation and timing of those moves," Boon says. "There was a lot of trial and error."

Boon also notes that the many involved departments had to iterate many times so that X-Rays could "feel so outrageous and satisfying." Kawa was one of those who touched the new system, citing it as the most challenging thing he worked on.

"We couldn't always have [the guts] in there, so we came up with this [process where] when the camera switches in, the models have their full models inside," he says. "We don't have to worry about the gameplay then, so it's not like the characters themselves have all their guts in them [at all times]. It's only when we went to the X-Ray camera that they have all that stuff in them because otherwise the game would never run."

People unanimously cited X-Rays as a tentpole feature. Syed remembers spending his first day going through the raw X-Ray animations for kicks. O'Meara says it always felt good to see fan reactions. To him, much of the impact was better because of the framing. While older entries had gory moments, MK9's camera framed them more appropriately to highlight "cinematic art."

THE MORTAL KOMBAT LEGACY

The X-Ray system found its way into MK9's two sequels and was just one carryover that sat alongside its super meter and 2D plane. But the game's legacy goes far past its mechanics and was widespread enough to mean different things to different people. O'Meara, a huge fan of the series, admires MK9 for what it means to the players.

"As a fan, it's like, 'This feels like I got to be in MKII again, but it's uprezzed, and everything's more graphic,'" O'Meara says. "Like, 'We're back to the foundation that made MK so exciting, but better.'"

Boon describes how the single-player focus was a driving force for the team's following games.

"Mortal Kombat validated our theory that there was a strong demand for single-player content in fighting games," Boon says. "In many ways it set the foundation for the NetherRealm Studios games that followed. Even though MKvDC was the first game with our story mode, Mortal Kombat is where it really took off. Plus, it introduced the Challenge Tower, King of the Hill, and much more."

MK9 perhaps left the biggest imprint on NetherRealm. After a weak crossover and turbulent times, MK9 gave the team a sturdy foundation to build on and showed it had survived and created one of its best games ever. It was a declarative statement for the team and the entire franchise. Villani details how that success led to NetherRealm's validation as a big "new" developer worthy of the money WB paid.

"From the studio perspective, it's definitely the thing that catapulted them into such a solid place in terms of being able to be as big as they are with their quality bars that they're expecting," Villani says. "And with the full support and funding of Warner Bros., it literally confirmed everything that they bought the team for. Every game from there on out that was done by that studio owes a great deal to the quality and critical success that MK9 was. That's where that team coalesced and where everything happened to literally confirm that everything from that point on would be good."

Villani also touches on what this game meant historically, looking back at MKvDC's shaky steps and forward to what would become Injustice: Gods Among Us, released in 2013. Mortal Kombat's campaign, extensive single-player modes, competitive scene, and DLC model were all iterated upon in NetherRealm's future games, showing how pivotal that game truly was.

"All those games can trace back to that release, in terms of like a new era type thing," Villani says. "Obviously, there's the preamble, which is MKvDC. The confidence in what the studio was capable of and the IP's strength was just confirmed in every way you could possibly imagine. That's really the legacy. It definitely bootstrapped the whole series and also was the predecessor to Injustice. Nothing but good came out of that and was one of those key products that really spawned so many things. That's where it really should be remembered, even if it's not people's favorite."

MK9 is many people's favorite, though, even after two prettier and bloodier sequels. The mix of nostalgic callbacks to the original trilogy and an array of new mechanics was a balance that appealed to casual players and ones that had been there since the beginning. A reboot rarely hits those two extremes and completely revitalizes a series, especially given the odds NetherRealm faced at the time. Despite almost being a fatality, MK9 gave an old team a fresh start and the series enough momentum to reach its 30th anniversary with no signs of slowing down. ■

For more on Mortal Kombat head to GameInformer.com to read our interview with series co-creator Ed Boon, who is celebrating 30 years of kombat

SCORPION
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TO LIVE AND DIE IN *Hell* L.A.

-A

How Dambuster Studios is reviving **DEAD ISLAND 2** with gore, golf clubs, and pulp zombie horror

BY WESLEY LeBLANC

IN THE PANTHEON OF ZOMBIE ENTERTAINMENT, TECHLAND DIDN'T AIM TO REVOLUTIONIZE THE UNDEAD WITH DEAD ISLAND. INSTEAD, IT OPTED FOR FUN, putting zombies at the forefront of everything in both narrative and in gameplay. Dead Island released as a rarity in the zombie genre by using zombies to be just that – walking, undead, flesh-eating corpses – whereas properties spanning as far back as the origin of these monsters used them first and foremost as allegories, be it political, social, or something else. The Last of Us and *The Walking Dead* continued the trend of focusing on these creatures as the backdrop for human drama, further alienating Dead Island as a zombie story. Zombies, once more, took a back seat to the human drama, and games like Dead Island did the same, watching the infected, freakers, and other variations take over.

While various reports and even leaked gameplay reveal what earlier iterations of Dead Island 2 might have been, those versions will never be released, but Dambuster's will. And one thing is clear with this studio's game: the team is aiming to make zombies fun again. The human drama is there, but if the seven hours we played are any indication, your biggest problem in Los Angeles, or Hell-A as the game ironically calls it, is zombies. Unafraid to embrace the pulp action, horror comedy, gore and brutality, and of course, the term "zombies," Dambuster Studios is ready to prove why it is now the home of the Dead Island series. And after plenty of hands-on time at its Nottingham, England, studio and hours spent talking to the team, I'm inclined to agree.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing (3-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Deep Silver
DEVELOPER Dambuster Studios **RELEASE** April 28 **RATING** M

Golden State of Mind

Dead Island 2 begins with a lively cinematic setting up what exactly has gone wrong. The viral pathogen from Banoi is back, likely mutated into something even more uncontrollable, and it's quickly taken hold in Los Angeles. The military did its best to evacuate most people out of the city with some success. But, unable to put an absolute end to the various zombies already walking about, it quarantines LA from the rest of the world.

If you're wondering why LA is the setting for a game with the word "island" in its title, it's because while the city is not geographically an island, thematically, at this point in its timeline, it is – nobody goes in, nobody goes out. While the game's narrative supports that idea, I'd wager marketing LA as a setting is much easier than another tropical island. It also doesn't hurt that fighting zombies in LA makes for a great time.

Lead narrative designer Khan – who goes by just this name – tells me Dead Island 2 is set roughly a decade after the first game so there's plenty of room for mystery in how this virus made its way from Oceania to California. A lot can happen in 10 years. Ironically, you need to look no further than the history of the game itself for proof of that.

Dead Island 2's reveal came just a few years after the first Dead Island and a little over a year after Dead Island Riptide, a somewhat forgettable and repetitive sequel that continued the story of the first game. For most, Riptide was the last game they played in the Dead Island franchise. Some may have played Escape Dead Island, Dead Island: Epidemic, or Dead Island Retro Revenge, a 16-bit side-scrolling beat 'em up seemingly set in Dead Island 2's Los Angeles, but for most players, the franchise was likely over after two games. Publisher Deep Silver decided to put Spec Ops: The Line developer Yager on Dead Island 2, opting to part ways with Techland, which was already working on its new zombie universe in Dying Light. But, in 2016, the publisher revealed LittleBigPlanet 3 developer, Sumo Digital, was now developing the game.

The publisher declined to comment on this transition when asked, but many accounts point to Yager's version of Dead Island 2 being close to completion. In 2015, Yager managing director Timo Ullmann told *GamesIndustry.biz* that, "Having a project canceled in such a late state is a catastrophic event on so many different levels," and "it really is the worst possible outcome." Ullman said later in the interview, "Everybody involved loses."

Sumo's Dead Island 2 development continued but then, in 2019, Deep Silver announced Dambuster Studios was now developing the long-awaited sequel.

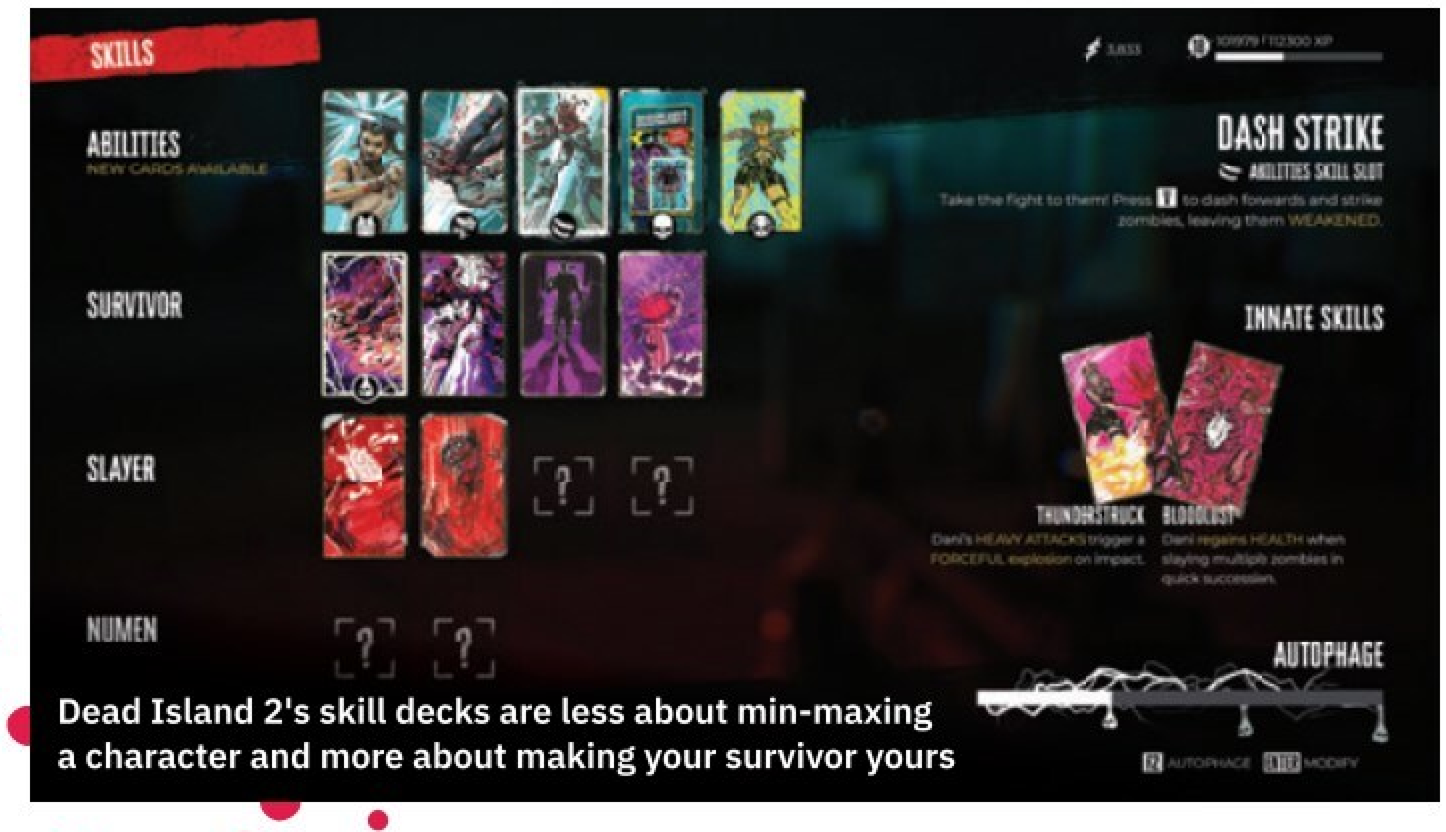
Dead Island 2's locations feature both day and night variants, and places like the Santa Monica Pier become especially terrifying at night

Fans of Dambuster likely noticed a coincidence: Dead Island 2 was the second long-in-development game the 160-plus team was tasked with bringing over the finish line. The studio is perhaps best known for being the third, final developer on Homefront: The Revolution. While that game's launch was panned critically, updates and patches showed Dambuster's committment to getting it up to par. Now, the team has the opportunity to create something truly its own, which is to say what you play next spring is entirely Dambuster's, as the studio started the game's development from scratch in 2018.

"We didn't feel as though we had to take on anybody else's work or any of the legacy development that happened beforehand," game director David Stenton tells me. "We have the opportunity to really put our own mark on it. Obviously, that's allowed us to focus really on areas of passion, which are horror and gore, but also, from a gameplay point of view, we knew that we wanted to laser focus on, 'Let's be the absolute best-in-class first-person melee combat.'"

Whether Dead Island 2 lives up to Dambuster's hope remains to be seen, but it's on the right path.

According to Khan, the six playable survivors (two more than in Dead Island), are precisely the kind of people you think would thrive in a place like a "zomb-pocalypse" LA. I went hands-on with two of them: Irish punk rocker Dani who has a knack for roller derby, and firefighter-dressed sex worker Ryan, lovingly positioned as the de-facto gruff guy hero type character whose profession pre-apocalypse had him removing his protective gear. And Khan's right; these characters love plunging knives into the skulls of zombies, zapping crushers with electricity, and drop-kicking shamblers 10 feet into the air.



Take the fight to them! Press to dash forwards and strike zombies, leaving them WEAKENED.

Dani's HEAVY ATTACKS trigger a FORCEFUL explosion on impact.

Dani regains HEALTH when slaying multiple zombies in quick succession.

Dead Island 2's skill decks are less about min-maxing a character and more about making your survivor yours

Zombies in the City of Angels

After a plane escape goes wrong, I crash-land in LA in control of Dani. The stakes are immediately high. The city is on fire and the zombies are no joke. I fend off a few, helping local A-list movie star Emma Jaunt survive in the process, until I'm bitten. Surprisingly, Dani seems immune, and as any good-standing citizen would, she decides her next course of action must be getting her blood to a doctor or scientist that can help. My seven hours of gameplay feature very little of the overarching "get your blood to them" narrative, but it's clear this is the primary motivation for the survivors (although Dani has a roller derby match to catch and Ryan, a brother to save). What I like most about the game's opening is it doesn't require an understanding of Dead Island. Fans of the first game will notice callbacks and familiar systems, but Dambuster is charting its own course for this universe with plenty of respect for what came before.

Los Angeles was always a crucial part of this idea, and it's why Dambuster didn't consider a different location. "It gives us a great opportunity for big character, both in location and actual people," creative director James Worrall says. "Los Angeles has quite an eccentric or expressive kind of culture and identity. And that identity is recognized all around the world. Whether you've ever been to LA or not, we've all seen it through the lens of Hollywood, and we thought that would be a great way to entertain while you're running around punching zombies."

Going into Dead Island 2, I expected to see iconic locales like Beverly Hills, the Santa Monica Pier, and the Hollywood sign. They're all there (though the Hollywood sign is on fire), and I recognize plenty more that are obscured by shadow on the game's map. Dead Island 2 isn't an open-world game but rather a sizeable city-spanning map with multiple hubs to visit and explore. You will encounter loading screens moving between each area, such as going from Beverly Hills to Bel-Air. Thankfully, fast travel is present after a certain point.

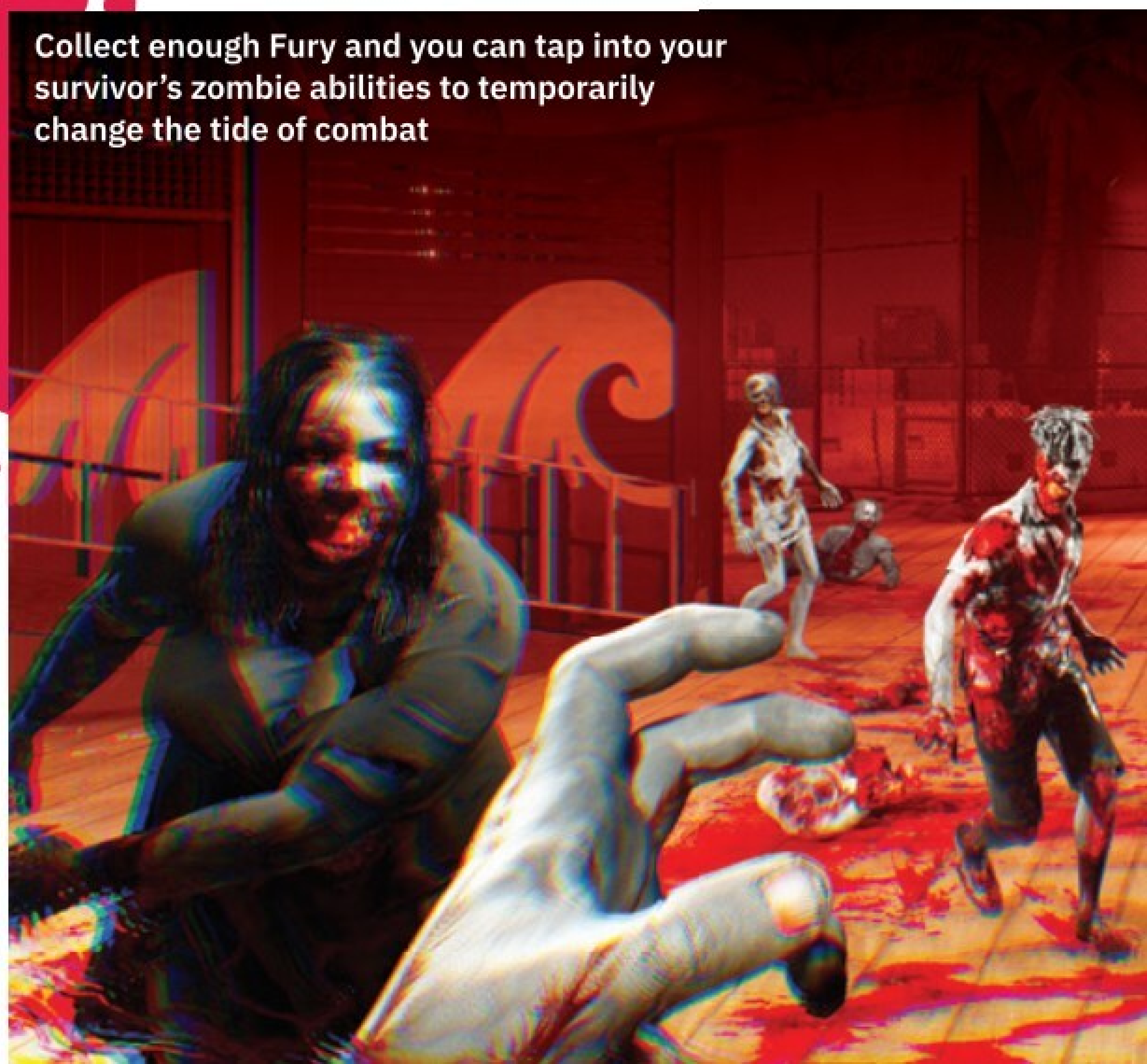
With so much of LA being instantly recognizable around the globe, the team had a challenge in determining which locations to include. The core guiding principle was character. "Instead of a standard semi-militarized reaction from the populace, you get a lot of people whose egos, and perhaps privilege to a certain extent, gives them a certain ... pompous approach," Worrall says. "And so many of our locations reflect where these people would hold out and live."

The team mixed that approach with postcard locations. Bel-Air, for example, will look like you might imagine on a postcard, complete with mountainside mansions that scream luxury. And it features characters who reflect the populace that might live there too – privileged, wealthy, and expecting a savior because of course the world would save them, right? Emma Jaunt falls somewhere in that dynamic, and she was one of the first people Dani sought out after escaping the wreckage of the game's opening plane crash.

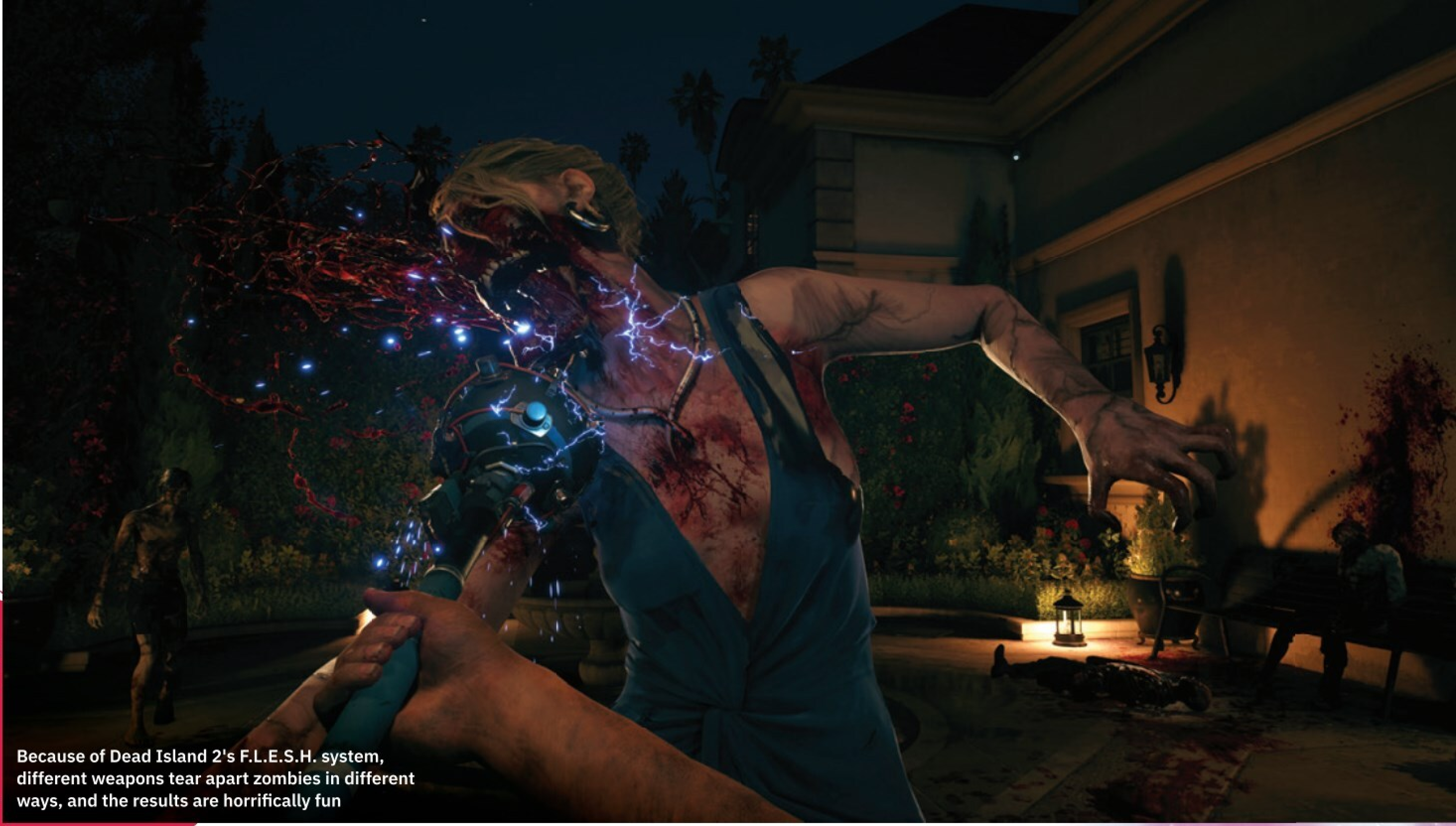
When I finally arrive at Emma's location, I find her holed up with her assistant discussing how surely someone is en route to save her (spoilers: nobody is en route to save her). Over time, this mansion becomes the HQ for characters like Carlos, the trader with med-kits, weapons, and more, and other characters I meet during side quests. The "Who Do You Voodoo?" rapper Sam B, the playable survivor from Dead Island, even makes an appearance here. While I didn't get to see how expansive this cast becomes, I get the sense the characters I meet will eventually make their way back to the HQ of my party, be it Emma's mansion or some other place as we navigate through Hell-A. I like seeing this growth as it adds a sense of progression to Dani's relationships and extends the impact of side quests beyond immediate effects, even if it's something as simple as being able to chat with them about the ensuing chaos while taking a breather.

Bursting at the Seams, Literally

It wasn't until after meeting up with Emma that Dead Island 2's gameplay truly opens up. Various Dambuster members reiterate the studio's desire for its zombie action to be fun above all else, and it was, both in gameplay and presentation. Dead Island 2 is one of the goriest games I've ever played, and that's on purpose. In fact, Dambuster has created the Fully Locational Evisceration Simulator for Humanoids, or F.L.E.S.H. system, to make that possible.



Collect enough Fury and you can tap into your survivor's zombie abilities to temporarily change the tide of combat



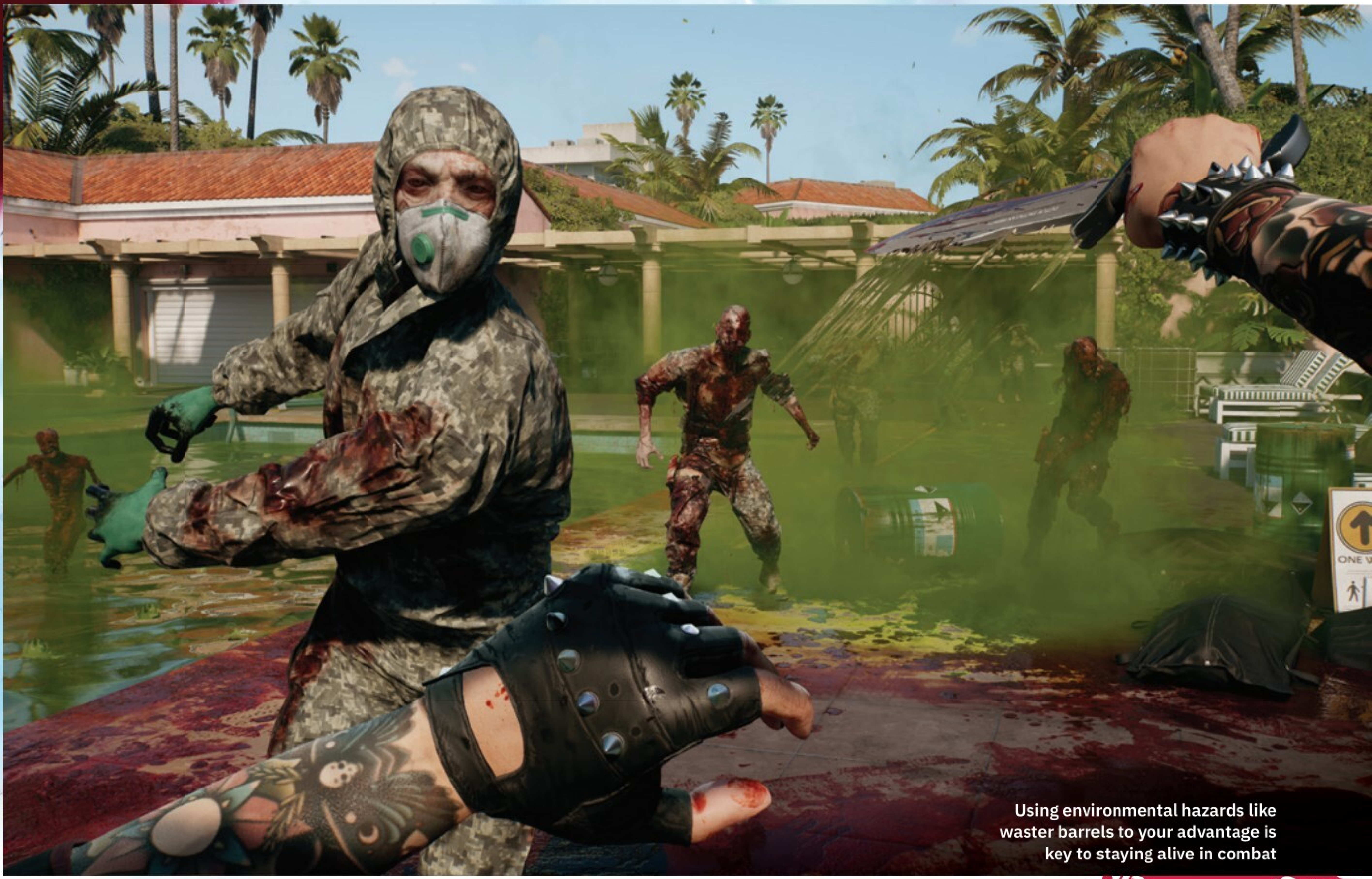
Because of Dead Island 2's F.L.E.S.H. system, different weapons tear apart zombies in different ways, and the results are horrifically fun

"We really wanted to make sure that the impacts felt impactful and...it's a zombie game, so people want lots of gore," technical art director Dan Evans-Lawes says. "We really came up with it as a method for just making the minute-to-minute gameplay more enjoyable and more fun and more visually spectacular. And it also hits the tone of that kind of schlocky, kind of pulpy gory horror game we've got. It's a fundamental part of the game."

After playing Dead Island 2 for more than seven hours, I am most impressed by the F.L.E.S.H. system. It is the highlight of the game and Dambuster has gone to great lengths to showcase the system in every combat scenario. Simply put, what you think would happen upon impact happens, and because it's procedurally generated, it always feels fresh. I wouldn't be surprised if the QA specialist that guided me through my gameplay sessions walked away worried about what was going on in my head because more than a few times, I spent minutes bashing a zombie's corpse to pieces, laughing out loud at the carnage on screen.

I wanted to see if a sledgehammer cracked through a skull realistically before revealing a battered brain. I wanted to see if my kitchen knife would pierce through skin enough times that the body would open up, like a box knife to a package. I wanted to see if the ribs would give way to the organs beneath them and if I could rip arteries apart too. The answer to all of these and more was always, impressively, yes. Arteries spray blood, organs fall out of moving bodies once I tear the skin and muscles holding them inside, and eyeballs drip out of skulls bashed in by blunt weapons such as one of my favorites, the Enhanced Impactor Improvised Hammer. Even my Slaughtering Cremator Cleaver, imbued with flames, acted accordingly, cauterizing the skin around the various slashes I made.

"Lots of games have gore and they all work in different ways, but where the F.L.E.S.H. system really takes it forward is how it has this progressive effect so you can continue to damage them in many, many different ways as you attack the zombie," senior render programmer Aaron Ridge says. "We aimed for a film-style gore. It's not real; it's fake-real from a film. It's supposed to look realistic. It's made of real stuff, but it's got that extremeness to it that's not supposed to make you think, 'Oh this is horrible; I don't want to see this.' You're supposed to go, 'Oh this is horrible; I do want to see this.'"


Using environmental hazards like waster barrels to your advantage is key to staying alive in combat

Combat How You Want It

After talking with Emma about my next steps in Hell-A, I travel to the Halperin Hotel, clearly inspired by the iconic pink Beverly Hills Hotel. On the way, I experiment with some of Dead Island 2's more immersive sim-like elements. I come across a group of zombies sitting in some standing water, resulting from a nearby street collapse. I recognize electricity in water is a potent combo, but without an electric weapon, I'm not exactly sure how to get those zombies sparking. Until I remember I can throw weapons. I throw one of my weaker wrenches at the traffic light above the water, which knocks it down, right into the heart of the zombies, leaving them all twitching with electricity. When elemental attacks like this are less apparent, water cans can be used to douse zombies, leaving them primed for an electric hit or two. I did the same with various gas cans littered around LA and a fire-imbued weapon.

It didn't take long for me to get into that familiar immersive sim-like groove where I view combat encounters as puzzles. Sure, I could attack a group of zombies head-on with a ground pound or two and my trusty hammer, but I could also douse them with water and electrify them with a nearby police vehicle's car battery. Perhaps a supply box is shrouded in electricity due to the water rushing onto the ground surrounding it. I could find a way to kill the power, but I could also throw a weapon at the water pipe, putting an end to its flowing current and clearing the way to open the box. Curveballs, which are regenerating throwables like pipe bombs and zombie bait, add even more to my puzzle-solving repertoire, especially in combat.

Dead Island 2 features hundreds of weapons, and with eight equipable slots in your weapon wheel, Dambuster wants players to constantly experiment with different types, imbued effects, mods, and more. Every weapon can be modded to include elements like electric, fire, or acid for boosted damage and status effects, and you can add additional traits as well. For my blunt weapons, I favor traits that increase force at the cost of attack speed, whereas for faster weapons, I'm happy with traits that bolster speed, even if it means my damage output is lower. Dead Island 2 design director Adam Duckett describes the game as a first-person action RPG in a nutshell, and while the game puts melee combat up front, the RPG elements bleed into almost every decision, save for narrative ones.

"Weapons progress through various rarities as you progress and level up your character in the game," he says. "There's always something new, something shiny, something that we dangle in front of players to try and get them to experiment. On the more action-oriented side, all the weapons have slightly different uses in combat. We have our sharp weapons that are really good at taking off limbs, and then we have blunt weapons, which are really good at knocking around crowds."

There are loads more, too, and different enemies require you to determine which might work best on the fly. In my seven hours, I grew fond of the Lightweight Impactor Golf Club, the Enhanced Electrocutor Machete, the Chef's Knife, the Lightweight Impactor Pipe Wrench, and the two aforementioned cleaver and hammer weapons. But I picked up or ignored dozens more. You never need to look far for a new weapon, and if one needs repair, Duckett says you won't need to spend a ton of resources. The team's take on weapon durability is less about punishing you for relying on one weapon too much and more about gently pushing you to experiment with others. You can also upgrade your favorites to keep them relevant as you level up.

The RPG nature of Dead Island 2 extends to your survivor, as well. As I play through the game's opening hours, I find various skill deck cards that further enhance my survivor's combat abilities. There are ability cards, which include things like dodge, block, dropkick, and ground pound, and survivor cards, which feature unique traits. I equip one where, when I successfully dodge an attack at the right time, I gain some health and another where my ground pound is boosted to send weaker zombies flying. Slayer cards include quirks that increase my stamina with a quick succession of attacks, for example, and innate skills are unique to the playable survivors. Dani's personal skills include Thunderstruck, which gives heavy attacks a powerful explosion on impact, and Bloodlust, which lets her regain health with a quick succession of attacks.

Some skill deck cards drop randomly upon defeating even the weakest zombie type, the Shambler, while others serve as rewards after boss fights. The ground pound skill card, which allows Dani to leap into the air and smash the surface below for area-of-effect damage, is a card the bridezilla crusher boss in the Halperin Hotel area drops.

Dead Island 2 rewards offense-heavy players with abundant weapons and skill types, but the game also rewards more cautious players who prefer to view each scenario as a puzzle to solve in compelling ways. Dambuster deserves to be applauded for this because, in a game that I could see stretching across 20 hours with countless zombies to defeat, that type of variety and experimentation will be key to keeping me engaged.

STOP
AN'S RENTALS
BIKES & SKATES & SURF BOARDS
SURFING · BIKES · SKATES

VENICE KITCHEN

Wedding Crushers

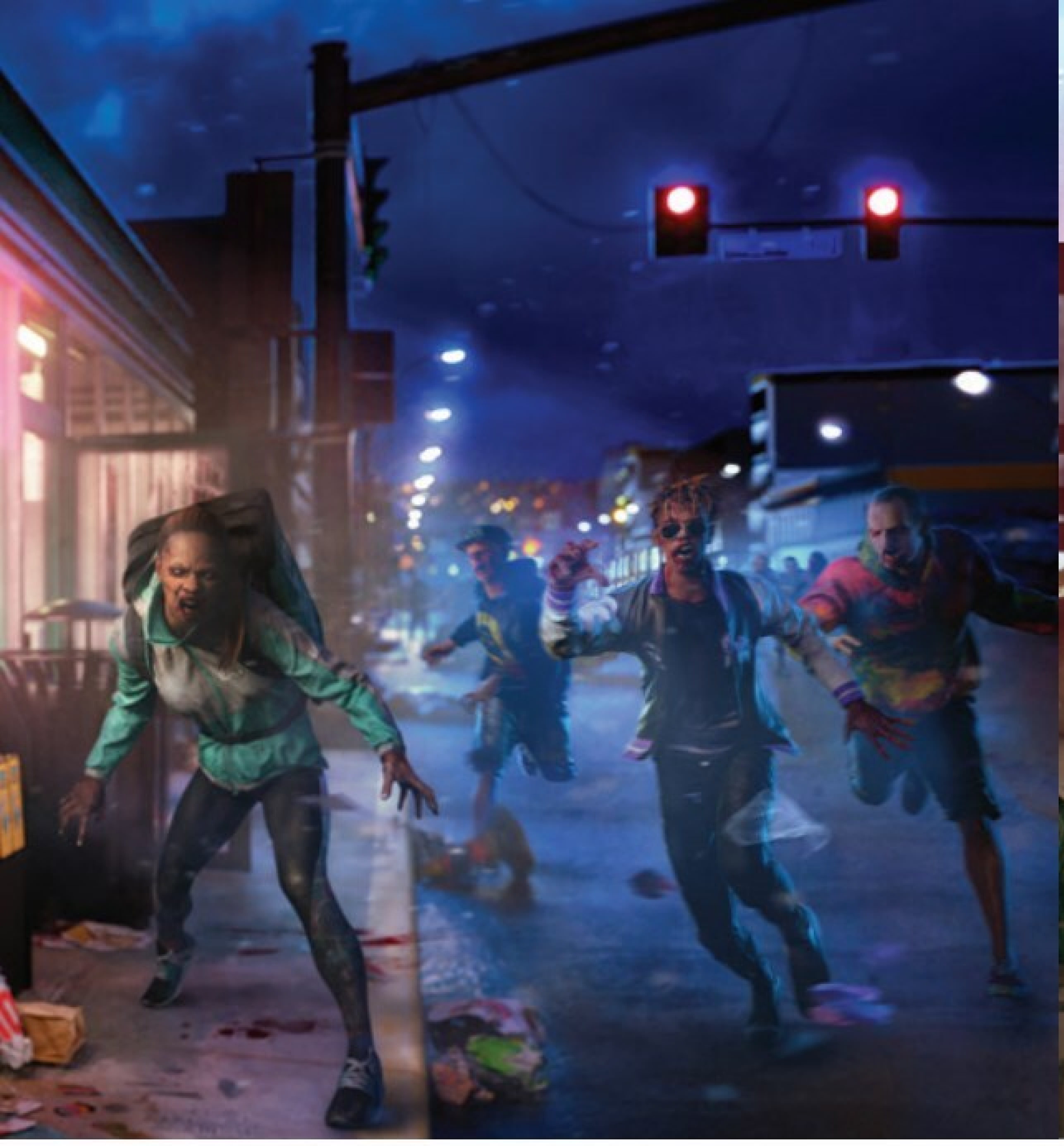
The worldbuilding in Dead Island 2 is just as impressive as the combat so far, and the Halperin Hotel level I play is a great example. When I arrive, it's clear this hotel was the site of something to do with the military. Zombies dressed in hazmat and riot gear frequent the area, and an otherwise stylish hotel lobby is full of radios, monitors, supply crates, and more. Something happened here, and as I continue further, looking for someone to help me get my immune blood in the right hands, I realize the Halperin Hotel is also telling a tragically hilarious story all on its own.

The central lobby is connected to an event space and peering through the window, I see a wedding was supposed to happen. As I progress through the level, I realize my suspicions are correct. I find a room clearly intended to house the bridesmaids and other wedding guests. Elsewhere, collectibles tell the story of a bride who, hell or high water (or in this case, a zombie apocalypse) was going to have her dream wedding.

All of this culminates in a boss fight against the crusher, a hulking new zombie type who is hard-hitting and deadly. The twist, though, is this crusher was the bride I had been reading about as I made my way through the hotel. Against the backdrop of the military using the hotel's acid-filled pool to disintegrate zombie corpses, this bride was going to have her wedding cake and eat it too. It's a shame her new zombie form ripped what otherwise was a beautiful wedding dress and even more a shame I had to spoil her big day by killing her on her reception dance floor.

Dani's innate abilities make her perfect for players who prefer their action up-close and personal

This boss fight is challenging – I die three times, but each time feels fair. The first time, I'm too cautious about using my med kits, only to realize the arena has a few more for me to pick up. The second time, I'm not paying enough attention to her ground pound move and her chain of swinging arm attacks, instead trying to brute force my attacks through her combos. The third time I may or may not have electrocuted myself to death. When I finally take her down, she drops the ground pound skill deck card, much to my delight. I'm excited to see how the rest of Dead Island doles out its skill deck cards, be it randomly against mob zombies or in more cinematic boss fights like this.

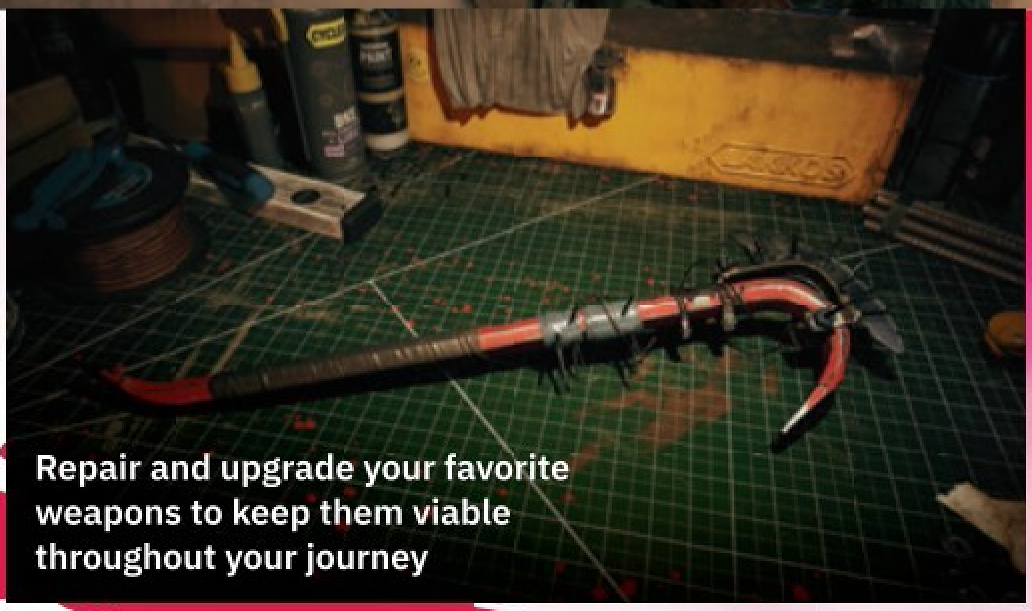


Clowning Around

From here, my journey through Dead Island 2 takes me to side quests where I save a character named Curtis, who reminds me of Bill Murray in *Zombieland*. I also save an annoying Gen Z content creator named Amanda, who uses my dropkick abilities to create a new highlight reel for her TikTok adjacent platform. While I only complete a few missions, each feels lovingly crafted. They exist to give the player another chance to earn experience and add a bombastic character to the overall cast. I hope the rest of the side quests are equally compelling in design and narrative.

Barreling toward the end of the game's opening hours, I search for someone in Beverly Hills, only to meet the drunken pants-less Rikky, who claims to be a former rockstar, and his friend Roxy, who's more concerned with her next drink than the deadly zombies surrounding her place. Like Curtis and Amanda, Rikky and Roxy are flavorful additions to the menu of Dead Island 2's cast, and I can't wait to see what other hijinks they get into later in the game.

After Beverly Hills, I make it to Santa Monica Pier, this time in control of a much higher-level Ryan, a sex worker whose strip routine is all about fighting fires. This section of the game was playable at Gamescom earlier this year, so you might already have an idea of how it goes, but it plays like a terrifying walk through a funhouse where a horrifying clown zombie named Butcho that uses his actual arm bones, shaved down to be sharp swords, greets you. This fight is the clear highlight, especially in how Butcho regenerates his entire health bar by feasting on the flesh of nearby corpses. Butcho pushes me to fight fast and hard, dropping the more cautious approach I typically have in combat. If the bride boss and Butcho are any indications, Dead Island 2's boss fights will be one of the more memorable aspects of the game.



Repair and upgrade your favorite weapons to keep them viable throughout your journey

After nearly eight hours of Dead Island 2, I've barely scratched the surface. I completed about five quests, each with plentiful distraction by way of chests to loot and zombies to kill, and my survivors' story had only just begun when it was time to stop playing. With some time removed from my gameplay sessions, I genuinely can't wait to play Dead Island 2 again. The game's seemingly troubled development kept my expectations in check – this was a game built from scratch in its third studio just a few years ago – but I realize now that trepidation wasn't necessary.

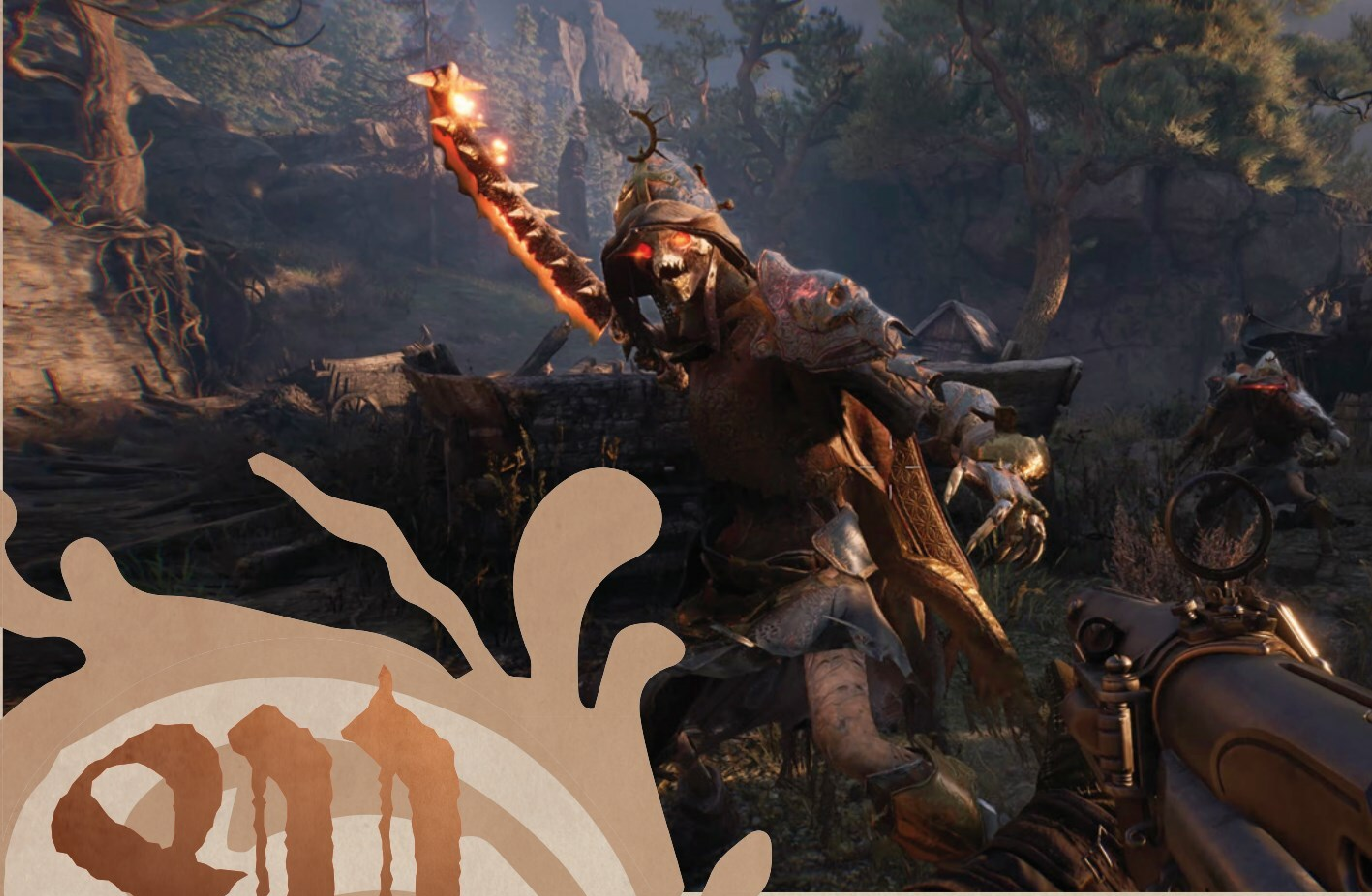
Dambuster has opted to do more than bring this previously troubled game to the finish line. It is instead thriving in the opportunity to rebuild Dead Island 2 in its own vision, making its mark on the franchise in more ways than one. I suspect its full release will highlight just how smart it was for Deep Silver to put this game in Dambuster's hands and if what I played is any indication, the team has created something special in the zombie genre; a game that unabashedly revels in its absurdity, unafraid to put the undead at the heart of all it does. And perhaps most importantly, Dead Island 2 is here to prove zombies can be more than the backdrop; they can be fun again. ■

For more of the gory details, including interviews and video content, visit GameInformer.com/DeadIsland2

FIGHTING FIRE WITH Fire

BY MATT MILLER

The long simmer of years-long development has made Witchfire the surprise shooter to watch in 2023



When you think about top-tier action, The Vanishing of Ethan Carter is not the first game that comes to mind. The 2014 adventure game blended elements of horror and investigation to great effect but certainly didn't embrace high-octane shooting or traversal. Even so, dig a bit, and one finds the development team at The Astronauts has a much deeper pool of experience to draw on, having been instrumental in crafting games like Painkiller and Bulletstorm. The surprising success of Ethan's adventure allowed the studio to step back and begin work on an ambitious project harkening to its earlier work and gradually building it out over many years into an exacting desired shape.

Having seen Witchfire in action for several hours, I can attest that the resulting project looks great. Stellar visuals, fueled by new-gen graphical techniques, compete with what you'd expect from dev teams many times this size. Combat blazes with speed and precision. And thanks to a recent core redesign of systems, the flow of play is freeform, creative, and choice-driven as players move through a newly open design. For anyone waiting impatiently, Witchfire feels like it has been a long time coming. But the wait is nearly over, and there's every reason to be excited about the adventure ahead.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** The Astronauts **DEVELOPER** The Astronauts **RELEASE** Early 2023 (Early Access)

A GRIM FATE

Witchfire is unapologetically dark. Some fiction imagines witch mythology from the perspective of popular fairy tales, but The Astronauts' take is rooted instead in a heady mix of ancient pagan storytelling and a strange twist on Christian church history. Namely, a church forming in a world where there was never a figure named Jesus Christ. In this alternate universe, witches wield truly dark necromantic magic, leading to an ageless war between the two forces and a disheartened humanity caught in the middle.

"The difference in this world is the fact that the witches are real; these are not just persecutions or political fights or anything like that," says creative director Adrian Chmielarz. "They are real, and they are pretty evil. And the Church is corrupt, as well. This is not a very happy world."

Enter the Preyer. Witchfire's protagonist is far from a hero. Instead, they're a creation of the Church after it turned to dark magic itself, transforming willing sinners into witch hunters armed with spells and weapons conjured by

Vatican sorcerers. They are not fighting to live and be set free. Instead, the Preyer has been promised that if they enact the Church's will for long enough, the Pope will absolve them of their sins and they'll be killed, ensuring they don't face damnation.

"The Church will infuse your blood with witchfire," Chmielarz says. "Which makes you immortal. You will reanimate. You can't die. So, you will never go to hell. But you have to keep the steady supply of witchfire. You need to keep hunting witches." Without the witchfire, the Preyer is a husk with little to no memory and limited power. As more foes fall before them, memories begin to return, and strength increases.

As the game begins, players take the Preyer into the belly of the beast, confront the infamous Witch of the Black Sea, find the keys to her lair, and retrieve a mysterious chest – though the Church has forbidden the Preyer from looking inside. The relic was lost hundreds of years ago, and the Church considers its recovery a top priority. "You will have these skeletons and demons fighting you and other stuff," Chmielarz says. "But at its core, it's a heist movie."

A WITCH'S BREW BECOMES SOMETHING NEW

Whether watching the game played or talking to Chmielarz about its creation, it's clear The Astronauts borrow ideas from several places but intend to craft something entirely new. Chmielarz has much praise for games like Hades and Returnal regarding their approaches to roguelike storytelling and gameplay structure. And Witchfire's dark tone, diegetic storytelling, and challenging skill-based play draw clearly from Dark Souls and Bloodborne.

Perhaps most notably, anyone who has played more than a few hours of Destiny will recognize the feel of movement, shooting, and moment-to-moment action rooted in a love of Bungie's long-running online shooter. That's not a coincidence, as Chmielarz is a fervent player of the game. "I'm not kidding; I have 8000 hours in Destiny 1 and 2 combined," Chmielarz says. "Destiny took a lot of solutions from previous shooters, right? There was some traces of Bulletstorm in Destiny, and Bulletstorm took from other games. Then you can go back to the first Wolfenstein or whatever. We did the same with Destiny."

Nonetheless, even while looking to best-in-class games for inspiration, Witchfire is undeniably original. Beyond the mixture of dark fantasy trappings into a fast-moving FPS structure, Witchfire's approach to roguelike loops, level design, and upgrades all stand apart.

A big part of that distinctiveness comes from a difficult decision the team made earlier this year, delaying the game but transforming the experience from an arena-style shooter to one with a semi-open world.

Even in early builds I saw months ago, Witchfire's battles played out in large "witch trap" arenas with artificial barriers containing the action. These forced battles demanded the player fully confront an area's foes and then select one of a few paths out of the room to continue to the next arena – a familiar model for many action roguelikes. "I was looking at [Witchfire], and I was like, 'Why are we cheating the players that this is open-world?'" Chmielarz says. "'We are showing all these vistas, but they are dead? I can't go there because I'm locked in the arena. Shouldn't we actually try for something that is truly open world?'"

Months later, a new demo reveals a fundamental rework. Big climactic battles against an array of undead foes remain, but the Preyer is now free to engage or work around threats as desired. As a result, like in the recent release of Elden Ring, Witchfire becomes a game with three distinct paths to success –

developing high skill to confront challenges head-on, using clever positioning and exploits, or grinding and over-leveling. All three are valid and encouraged. In one exchange, I saw the Preyer roll through wave after wave of charging skeletons, even with limited powers and weapons at their disposal. In another instance, the witch hunter picked off several foes from a high castle parapet before descending to clean-up. And thanks to the magic of demo god mode (but still likely obtainable in real play through grinding), I saw the Preyer charge into a fight with an impressive array of synergistic upgrades, leading to a thorough trouncing of the Witch's forces.

Chmielarz is fond of saying Witchfire is built as a "roguelike for people who don't like roguelikes." The team is still experimenting with implementation specifics, but one of the chief ways that goal manifests is static level layouts. Where many roguelikes are constantly throwing new rooms and configurations at you, Witchfire's level geometries are fixed, allowing you to gain mastery and understanding of each space. Moreover, the enemy configurations encountered in one run to the next also remain mostly intact, allowing you to plan an approach and consider upgrades, weapons, and a navigation path that gets you to each area's boss. "You can overpower yourself, and you can just grind if you want," Chmielarz says. "But every single run, you're getting something. And the other thing is you can actually learn how to deal with the game because we open it up to planning. You can really attack this game almost as if it was part of a single-player campaign."

However, once you beat that boss, the battle configurations reset, establishing a new seed of enemy confrontations to tackle the next time you decide to take on that zone. The unique structure is an unusual twist aiming at finding the best of both strategic planning and newness.

BUILDING A BETTER WITCH HUNTER

Witchfire has build-crafting baked into its bones. Mechanically, there's a constant drive to upgrade. But in the lore, you're simply recovering knowledge and memories you already had. "Losing witchfire also means you forget things," Chmielarz says. "You forget your lessons. You forget the spells. All that occult forbidden knowledge is lost on you because you are not mentally capable anymore to understand it."

Each time players begin a run; they start at a base camp before heading out to battle against the Witch's minions. The possibilities are extensive for approaching a run, and numerous tweaks both before and during your run provide flexibility.

The Preyer carries three weapons into battle, the third of which is a powerful demonic heavy weapon with unique capabilities. But even standard weapons are tweaked when perks alter its utility. I saw the Hunger hand cannon used with three power-ups applied. The first rewards more critical hits before a reload with more unholy bullets (which are especially powerful). A second perk increases the power of those unholy bullets with each crit. Finally, a third added perk makes the first body shot count as a critical hit, and reloading grants freeze if all shots are critical. It's not hard to see the possibilities. Of course, acquiring and arranging that synergistic weapon setup is the real trick. "Initially, you have this gun, and it's just a piece of metal to you," Chmielarz says. "But after some kills or some mini-quests that will help you understand the weapon, it will reveal itself to you."

Freezing your foes is just one of several elemental effects that can play off each other in your build. For instance, light an enemy on fire, and they take more damage from other sources. Lightning has the potential to chain to other near foes. Decay is like a bleed effect that slowly ticks away enemy health.

Beyond weapons, players also carry a relic, fetish, and ring, each of which might have game-changing global abilities that change how you play. I saw the Shadowmist Ring in action, which let the Preyer dash out of danger and leave behind a decay bomb. The Bittersweet Nightshade fetish produces a powerful shockwave whenever you get low on health.

Many of the most important ways to alter your build are encompassed by the Arcana system. The Preyer gradually builds an arsenal of Arcana – these are spells and other abilities that expand your playstyle and let you shake up the battlefield, and are generally divided into categories for weapons, spells, and varia. In the current build, Arcana are selected at the hideout before a run, and boosted over the course of play, but the system is still evolving with development. In one instance, I saw a lightning spell used in tandem with a cursed bell, which could be deployed onto the battlefield and then shot to stun enemies. In another instance, one might combine higher fire damage with exploding enemies on critical hits, chaining fiery death to other foes nearby.

As the undead army of the Witch falls before the Preyer's implacable violence, each destroyed monstrosity releases witchfire. Some witchfire is free-floating in the air for use during your run to boost your current capabilities. Other crystallized witchfire is meant to carry over after you die or complete your run, providing currency for power-ups fueling your next attempt.

The combined effect is one where each run at the Witch's forces supplies both knowledge and power, slowly unraveling the resurgent capabilities of the Preyer even as they begin regaining the memories of what came before in their accursed half-life.

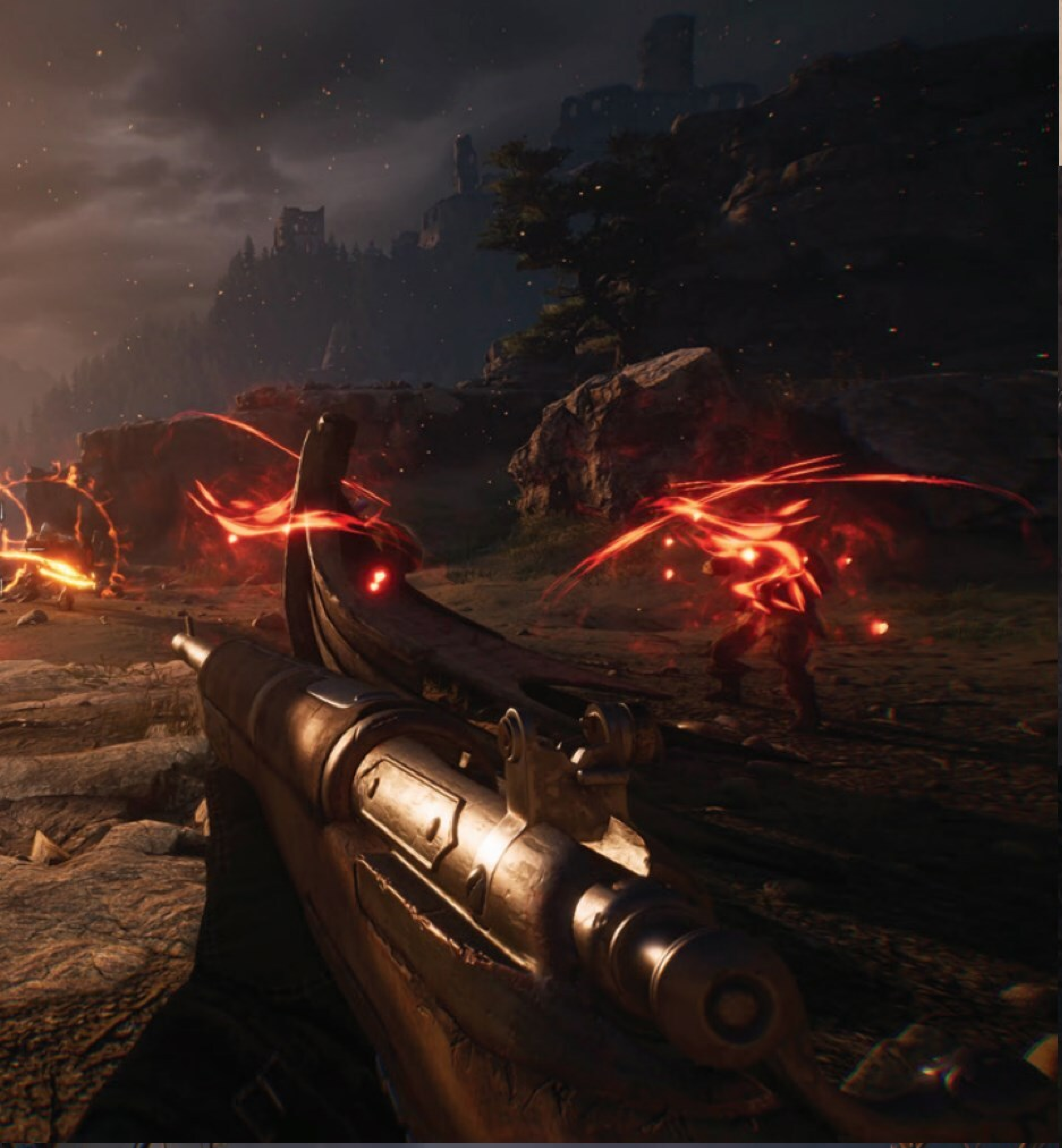
PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

While exhaustive upgrade systems and rewarding roguelike loops are good signs, the proof of Witchfire's potential lies in its gameplay. While my early look stopped short of hands-on exploration, the hours I watched left me excited. The Destiny influence is apparent, with rapid speed in movement, a snappy weapon aim-and-shoot mechanic, and a pace of play that is deeply reminiscent of Bungie's style.

But instead of alien landscapes, Witchfire reveals gorgeous medieval ruins, towering castles, and windblown forests. Extensive use of photogrammetry (extracting 3D info from photographs) gives the landscapes and textures an eerily realistic feel. Particles from spells and firearms constantly flash across the screen, lighting up the fantasy backdrops with color. The game is beautiful in motion.

I saw two levels in action, including the Castle and Village. "These levels are f---ing huge," Chmielarz says. "I didn't even know this was possible for us. One level is basically the size of Ethan Carter." The Castle is a sprawling walled keep and its environs, filled with hidden passageways, long stone bridges, and high vantage points. The Village reveals the remains of a long-lost crashed fleet of ships and the devastation that overcame its sailors as they futilely defended against the Witch's unrelenting forces. Each level has several dozen sites that would make for interesting battlefields. Those two big areas are what players are likely to discover at early access launch next year, but a Swamp and Monastery level are also planned, along with the final Witch's Lair, which can only be reached after acquiring keys from the bosses in the other zones.

A button tap brings up a map of each level, showing relevant spots for significant encounters, treasure chests, and other vital discoverables. A player's route through each run is entirely up to choice. You could skirt most of the biggest battles and beeline for the boss, but will you have enough power-ups to win that dangerous fight?



Witchfire appears unabashedly challenging. The sheer number of enemies coming your way in a given encounter is often hard to manage. On top of any expected battles, the game also randomly throws events called calamities into your path, often at the most inopportune moments. One might be a horde of slow zombies that are devastating at close range. Another might be a ghost galleon floating high through the air, raining down death. In each case, these calamities are a chance for a massive influx of witchfire to power your character up – if you can survive. It's the Witch's way of escalating the conflict and attempting to halt your progress.

In addition to a health bar, your most potent actions also drain a stamina meter, forcing you to ration your most aggressive tendencies or find yourself too deep in the action. At the same time, instead of waiting for a gradual recharge, defeating enemies helps refund stamina, encouraging a dangerous push-your-luck style of play rewarding risky and high-intensity fights.

The Astronauts still have unanswered questions about putting the finishing touches on Witchfire. The recent change to the level structure has demanded rethinking of many connected systems. And while the team knows it wants some character upgrades to remain unique to the current run and others permanent, the specifics of which remain unfinalized. Nonetheless, there's little doubt Witchfire hits many sweet spots for solo players looking for a high-intensity shooter couched in an intriguing fantasy premise. I walked away from my demo with high anticipation for its looming launch into early access. I don't envy the Preyer, the Witch, or anyone else living in the blighted world of this game. But I certainly can't wait to visit. ■

ONE MERRY VOYAGE

ONE PIECE ODYSSEY IS SHAPING UP TO BE A PROMISING MAIDEN VOYAGE THROUGH WELL-CHARTED SEAS

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

I finished the Arlong Park arc of the *One Piece* anime this year. That's to say, I went into a hands-on preview with One Piece Odyssey with just a dash of One Piece knowledge, knowing there are still 1000-plus episodes to watch and catch up on the series. After roughly two hours playing Odyssey, I am raring to jump back into the anime, and that's the best compliment I can give the game. It doesn't hurt that Odyssey is looking like a great JRPG with unique systems making playing easier for newcomers to RPGs and more dynamic for established fans.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER ILCA **RELEASE** January 13

I was worried about my lack of knowledge heading into this preview, but One Piece Odyssey producer Katsuaki Tsuzuki stresses that designing an RPG that appeals to all players, not just *One Piece* fans, was important for the development team at ILCA.

"We're developing this game so it can also be enjoyed by people who are very new to *One Piece*, but of course ... the more you follow *One Piece* ... you will have more appreciation towards that," Tsuzuki says through a translator. "In general, as long as you're interested in having an adventure with the Straw Hat crew in One Piece Odyssey, then you're up for it."

Logs within Odyssey fill in the spaces for players like me, too. When I reach Nanohana in Arabasta, these logs help me understand the location's importance. They don't provide the full story, though, which I think is great. I don't even feel spoiled on that arc; Odyssey gives enough information to understand the importance of reaching this place in the game. Games based on popular anime often fall into the trap of retelling established stories, but not nearly as well. That's not the case with Odyssey because instead of retreading classic stories fans already adore, Odyssey uses those arcs to tell new stories in familiar places.

For example, upon reaching the sandy desert city of Arabasta, the Straw Hat crew – captain Monkey D. Luffy, Brook, Franky, Roronoa Zoro, Sanji, Nami, Nico Robin, Usopp, and Tony Tony Chopper – is aware of its past adventures here. They talk about past experiences, Luffy remarks about his love for the Spice Bean Restaurant, and more. It reflects what *One Piece* has done in the past, and the new adventure builds on that.

Before reaching Arabasta, Odyssey sets up a disastrous situation for the Straw Hat crew and the Thousand Sunny ship it sails aboard. A cinematic reveals a mighty storm has knocked the *Thousand Sunny* off course, crashing it into the shores of a mysterious island. The shipwreck splits the Straw Hats up, and I control Luffy while attempting to find everyone. It's here that Odyssey introduces its unique, flashy, fun, and surprisingly in-depth combat system.

At this point, the entire crew is level 40, meant to demonstrate their prowess as pirates. Each member has nearly a dozen skills at their disposal, too, like Luffy's various Gum Gum moves. At its core, Odyssey is a turn-based RPG, and people familiar with the genre will quickly pick up on how the game's combat works. But looking deeper at its systems, I find mechanics inspired by Pokémon and dynamic scenes and menus inspired by the Persona series.

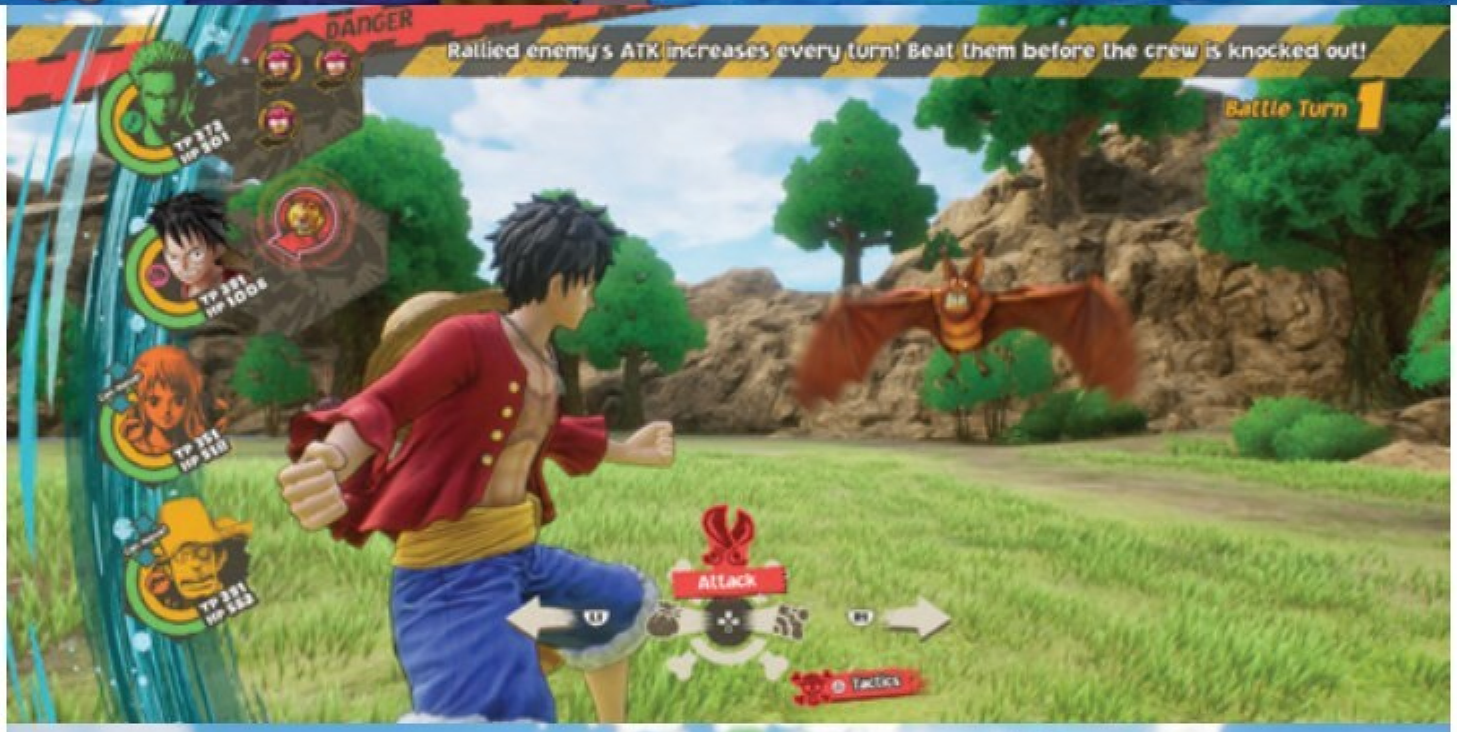
You encounter each enemy in a Scramble Area Battle, a system that spreads enemies out based on field placement. Luffy might be dealing with two enemies directly in front of him, and Sanji might not have an enemy in his zone, but his long-range moves allow him to attack those by Luffy. Nami can ignore the enemies closest to her to help Luffy, as well, or she can focus on those in front of her. I pay attention to every enemy on the field not just because they can strike at me from any position

but because each has weaknesses and strengths dictated by a Pokémon-esque, rock-paper-scissors-like system.

Power-type characters and enemies, and subsequent Power attacks, are strong against Speed, and Speed is strong against Technique, with Technique being most effective against Power. The game demonstrates effectiveness by using red arrows pointing up when aiming for an enemy with a specific move type or blue arrows pointing down to let you know that move isn't effective. Some actions carry status effects, too, like paralysis, bleed, and faint, which renders foes temporarily unconscious. Skills utilizing the moves fans of the manga and anime will likely recognize use Tension Points, but a super effective move can easily score you enough TP for another skill if you run out quicker than expected.

The combat is taken a step further with Dynamic Scenes, which are objectives sometimes introduced at the start of an encounter. In one story instance, enemies paralyze Usopp with a surprise attack, and the Dynamic Scene tasks me with defeating the enemies before they defeat the paralyzed Usopp, who can't fight back or defend himself. The enemies focus almost exclusively on him, meaning I must act fast. Completing a Dynamic Scene comes with extra experience and rewards, and it seems worth attempting each instance.

All of this translates to a highly dynamic combat system that hooked me just halfway through my first encounter. It's fast-paced, easy to understand, and features minor tweaks like being able to swap party members on the fly. Combat feels frantic and exciting in a way that will keep genre newcomers enticed. The U.I. and menus, especially in presentation, are also a feast for the eyes. Each move carries inspired animation that looks great and dynamic, and the menus pop with color and style. Even the post-battle summary screen is reminiscent of Persona 5, with characters appearing on screen in a fashionable sense to the tune of a jam.



Rallied enemy's ATK increases every turn! Beat them before the crew is knocked out!

On the note of music, it's fantastic; perhaps even the stand-out feature of this entire preview. It's adventurous, pirate-themed, and precisely what you'd expect from *One Piece*. It's no surprise, though, considering Dark Souls composer Motoi Sakuraba, who also has credits on the Tales and Super Smash Bros. series, is composing Odyssey's score.

"We chose Sakuraba to be the game's composer [because] when we think of compelling stories and RPGs – because that's also what we want to present in One Piece Odyssey – we do acknowledge that the element of music is very important," Tsuzuki says. "When we looked back at compelling RPGs with great music, Sakuraba-san always popped up in those conversations."

Tsuzuki says he also simply wanted to work with Sakuraba, and the prospect of doing so was exciting, so they asked the famed composer and he agreed. Sakuraba's score I've heard thus far in Odyssey is a significant departure from what I know him best from – the Dark Souls series – but it wraps up everything going on in the game in the same sense of adventure the anime's score does.

The opening moments teach you Odyssey's combat system, but shortly after, you're free to explore the starting areas of this mysterious island, which Robin determines is Waford, a location new to this universe. It's shrouded in mystery, naturally, because the crew has never been there, and only Robin has heard of it, but it's home to strange relics and artifacts covered in ancient-looking symbols. I soon learn these are attached to a new character created by *One Piece* creator Eiichiro Oda named Lim. This character is introduced just before I meet Adio, another new character created by Oda. Lim determines the Straw Hats to be pirates and, before any introductions, uses her strange power to take the crew's skills and strength and turn them into cubes she scatters around the world. At this point, the cushy level 40 characters I used to crush enemies are now level two, and their powerful skills are gone, too. All I can do is use my standard attacks, and I chuckle, watching enemies who were previously taking hundreds of damage points now take maybe a few dozen.

It's a fun spin on the typical "how do we make this strong party no longer strong" formula seen in RPGs, and I like that it's woven directly into the story. It also makes collecting these cubes fun, which is at the story's core. With each successful mission comes the prospect of a new cube and some of my previous skills and strength.

Lim takes the Straw Hat crew's powers because she fears they're standard pirates, the kind she has problems with, but she soon discovers that they're "good" pirates and regrets what she's done, informing them of what they need to do to return to their former selves: enter the World of Memories. While I don't get to see how this world works, it seems to be a portal that transports me to famed places from *One Piece* history, like the aforementioned Arabasta.

"In order to complete their mission and get their way out of Waford, they need to go back to the World of Memories," Tsuzuki says. "The mysterious island is basically a gateway in order for them to enter the World of Memories and enter, for example, Arabasta and Water Seven, to go back to the past and see what things are missing and what things they can solve at the time. What's also interesting is that heading into the past, let's say arcs, they are visiting two years after the events of the arcs happened, so they have prior

knowledge of what [these arcs] are about. So this mysterious island is the basis of the overstory, and going into the World of Memories is one of the missions in order to clear the overall mystery that is the mysterious island of Waford."

In Arabasta, I do some standard questing – defeat an enemy holding a mission item, return it to the person in need, collect some ingredients so crew cook Sanji can whip up a tasty soup for a local, and more. The individual objectives aren't the most exciting but looking at the beautifully-rendered world of Odyssey makes it easy. Being able to control various crew members at different times also keeps things exciting. Some players likely won't agree with the 3D aspect of the game, but it works for me, as does the odd, but quaint painterly visual style.

Side content in Odyssey isn't doing anything groundbreaking, although I admittedly only dabbled during my hands-on time. Odyssey is the first One Piece turn-based RPG of this caliber, breaking the mold of typical anime games that either go the 2D or 3D fighting or action route, and that alone is refreshing.

"*One Piece* is an action-packed IP, a thrilling anime, and of course, the adventure in between, and in the past... for example, with One Piece Fighting Blood and the One Piece Warrior series, [those experiences] provide the elements of action," Tsuzuki says. "We also notice that some of our fans are saying that they want to experience the adventure part more this time around, and taking that into consideration, we thought that RPG would be the most simple genre to provide that element of *One Piece*."

Tsuzuki says categorizing *One Piece* into a single genre is challenging, given its manga and anime elements. The RPG genre also opens One Piece Odyssey to allow fans to experience not just Luffy, but the entire Straw Hat crew. To ensure the team was nailing the staples of an RPG, Tsuzuki says the team looked at other popular RPGs, like The Witcher series and other Bandai Namco games like Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot.

Even with my relatively limited *One Piece* knowledge, it's easy to see how much care developer ILCA is putting into taking this franchise into RPG territory. Whether it ends up being a hit in the *One Piece* fandom remains to be seen, and the same goes for how authentic to *One Piece* as a franchise Odyssey is. If my two hours of hands-on time and interview with Tsuzuki demonstrate anything, though, it's that Odyssey is shaping up to be a unique and exciting JRPG, and one players should keep an eye on – *One Piece* fans or not. ■

Visit GameInformer.com for video of One Piece Odyssey in action on New Gameplay Today

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STAR WARS: JEDI SURVIVOR

A wealth of new details

The sequel to Star Wars: Fallen Order, Star Wars: Jedi Survivor, was announced some time ago, but developer Respawn Entertainment has remained mostly silent on what to expect. That changed in early December when a new gameplay trailer pulled the veil back on several new gameplay features, not to mention an impending March release date. Alongside the trailer, game director Stig Asmussen shared more details about the anticipated title.

One of the most notable additions is the arrival of several new stances for Cal Kestis as he goes into battle. "We have five fully realized stances in the game," Asmussen shares. "A lot of it depends on the enemy that you're coming across. It's advantageous to use certain types of stances against certain types of enemies, and it's up to the player to figure that out. It requires the player to break down the enemies and figure out what the best weapon of choice is."

The new stances include a dedicated dual blade, showing Kestis flipping and spinning his blades at high speed. A separate new stance finds the Jedi wielding a blaster and lightsaber simultaneously, adding a new ranged dynamic to his moves. "It really speaks to where we find Cal in this part of the story," Asmussen says. "It's five years since the first game, and the dark times are still in full swing. He's an unconventional Jedi, and he has to do unconventional things. So, something that would be frowned upon during the height of the Jedi Order? Cal's finding he's going to do whatever it takes."

Players also get a new heavy stance leveraging the crossguard-style lightsaber, made familiar by Kylo Ren. "It's a more confident approach," Asmussen says. "It's weighty; it's beefy. But you have to be very measured on how you use it because the timing windows are longer with the blade."

In addition to the return of well-received characters like BD-1 and Cere Junda, Respawn is introducing new faces, including a mercenary named Bode Akuna. "He and Cal form a special bond," Asmussen says. "It's almost like they're brothers. And they're not exactly the same, but they really do complement each other." Beyond story considerations, Bode plays a role as a buddy A.I. character who aids in both combat and traversal.

Jedi Survivor embraces several new traversal mechanics, allowing for much greater flexibility in exploration. That includes using an ascension cable for climbing and crossing distant points and Kestis' ability to tame and ride mounts. "It's much of a wider Metroidvania approach," Asmussen says. "Cal can cross huge gaps by chaining several types of skills together. But it's also about how we approach these mounts and how they're used to negotiate and dominate the world."

It's clear we're just scratching the surface. There's a new gang of enemies Cal must contend against. We also know Cal is visiting a new planet in the Star Wars fiction, which Asmussen says will be a central proving ground and place of exploration, alongside visits to numerous other worlds. The action and visuals (with some particularly impressive ray-tracing) look phenomenal. All signs point to a sequel that is more than ready to step up from the role of Padawan to that of a true Jedi Knight. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER Respawn Entertainment
RELEASE March 17

INSIGHTS FROM THE ACTOR

"He's been through a lot, and it's kind of changing his outlook on life, both for good and for bad," Cal Kestis actor Cameron Monaghan says. "I think he's wary of a lot of people and situations that he's walking into, and I think it changes some of the ways that he's interacting with the world around him. The Star Wars galaxy at this time is at an extremely dark point, and the situation for a Jedi has never been worse than what it is for Cal. He's looking for any way that he can to affect change, to survive, to protect the things that he cares about, and that's becoming increasingly difficult." Check out our full interview with Monaghan at GameInformer.com.

PATH OF TITANS

Mesozoic multiplayer

A thirsty triceratops stops at a pond in a clearing for a drink. The scene is peaceful until a tyrannosaurus bursts through the tree line, barreling toward the herbivore. Luckily, this triceratops has a pack of friends nearby. Does she stay and fight, hoping for backup, or retreat with her friends into the woods, leaving the T. rex behind?

This is the gameplay players can expect in Path of Titans, a dinosaur MMO from Alderon Games. In servers of up to 200 players, you explore open-world maps as one of the dozens of customizable dinosaurs. As your creature ages, it levels up and gains new skills and better stats – vital improvements when it's time for combat.

Gameplay in Path of Titans takes many forms, but usually involves exploring the map, completing quests, and gathering food and water to keep your dinosaur alive. For herbivores, that means finding the right plants to eat, but for carnivores, it means hunting, which might involve eating other players. PvP combat is always a threat, so it's smart to team up with friends or similar dinosaurs to stay safe.

Path of Titans has been in active development since 2019, and developer Alderon Games is aiming for an official global launch in the first quarter of 2023. In preparation for this massive milestone, Path of Titans has received a consistent stream of updates, adding playable dinosaurs, new mechanics, and more. This past July, the game came to Xbox, PlayStation, and Switch. December brings the biggest update yet: a new map and two new creatures that completely change the game.

The first new animal is the Thalassodromeus, a pterosaur and the first fully aerial titan. With it comes air-to-air and air-to-ground combat, which brings a new layer of strategy to the game. Meanwhile, the Kaiwhekea is a plesiosaur – while other dinosaurs could swim, this is the Path of Titans' first fully aquatic creature. This brings the game's total number of playable dinosaurs up to 30.

Path of Titans is also adding a new island-based map called Gondwa. Its design is focused on emphasizing verticality, both in the depth of its oceans and the height of its skies. Aquatic titans can explore a system of offshore canyon systems, while airborne titans can use thermal updrafts to reach high altitudes. There are also new Home Caves (bases players can decorate and use to safely rest) for aerial and aquatic dinosaurs, so it's the perfect place to experiment with the MMO's new species.

In addition to developer-created game content, Path of Titans has a lively modding community. Alderon Games is fully supportive of this, even going as far as providing modding tools on the game's official website. For example, you can add new playable characters like dogs or dragons, new maps like the alien world of Etis, or even new game modes and U.I. options. If you're a console gamer and you're worried you won't be able to access these features, don't be; Alderon's modding tools make mods accessible on all platforms.

"Modding will remain a primary focus," says Path of Titans project lead Matthew Cassells. "The team began as a group of former modders who went pro, and we're very much looking forward to wider release of the modding kit, expanding and supporting our modding community, and being a driving force behind building Unreal Engine 5 mods that are cross-play, cross-platform, and built to be played with friends who game on any and all internet-connected devices."

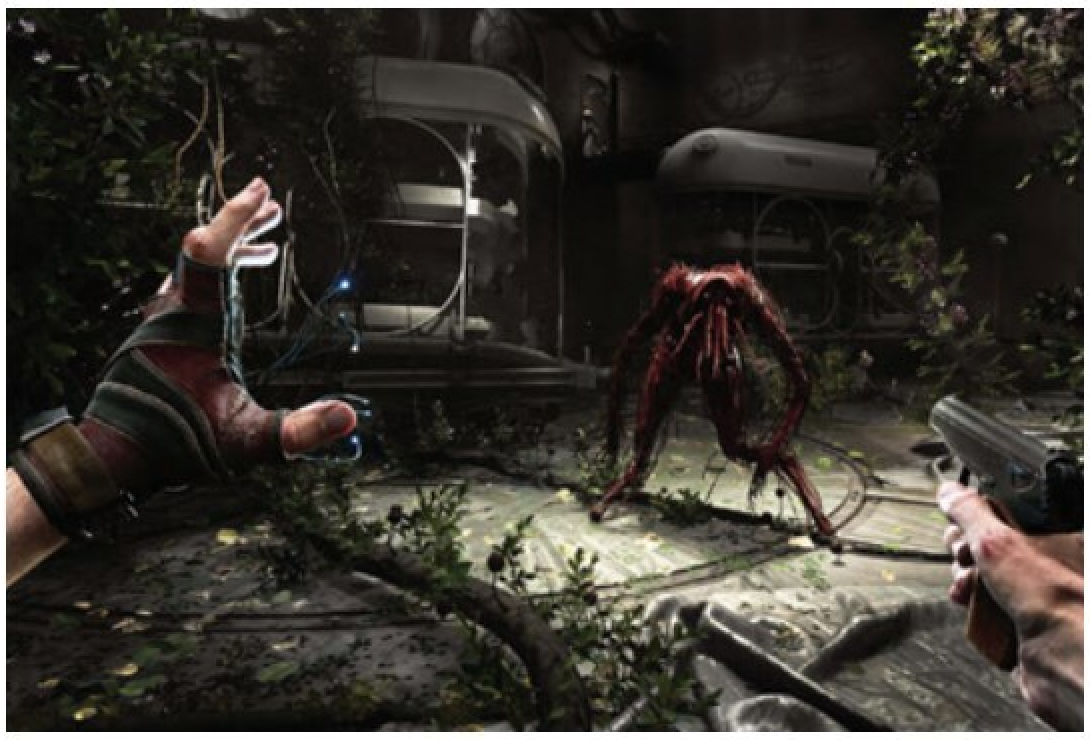
Whether you're playing official or user-created content, Path of Titans' future looks bright. With the strong foundation being laid by its most recent updates, it's safe to assume that this game won't be going extinct any time soon. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC • iOS • Android
STYLE Online Multiplayer Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Alderon Games Pty Ltd
DEVELOPER Alderon Games Pty Ltd **RELEASE** 2023

ATOMIC HEART

From Russia with love

Atomic Heart is one of those games where every time a new trailer comes out, it feels too good to be true. It looks too cool, too fun, too unique. Sometimes, these games deliver. Other times, not so much. Being skeptical about Atomic Heart is valid, but so is being impressed and excited about each trailer. Luckily, no matter how it shakes out, we'll soon be able to play it ourselves. Atomic Heart will be released February 21, 2023.



For the uninitiated, Atomic Heart is a first-person shooter RPG set in an alternate 1950s Soviet Russia. Visually, thematically, and stylistically, it seems to sit somewhere between the Bioshock series, Machine Games' Wolfenstein reboots, and Arkane Studios' Prey – retrofuturism with a quirky twist.

You play as a KGB agent named Major Nechaev. After World War II, robotics industries flourished, leading to the creation of a futuristic utopia. As you might expect, this all goes wrong. The robots rebel, mutants are born from human experimentation, and now the whole thing is your problem to solve. You do so with a variety of guns, melee weapons, and most interestingly, gravity and elemental-bending powers. Trailers have shown Nechaev manipulating objects around him, freezing enemies in walls of ice, and shooting bolts of electricity. It's gory, violent, and over the top.

Atomic Heart is in development at Mundfish, a new studio by way of developers who previously worked on the Doom, Fallout, and of course, Bioshock series. Mick Gordon, famous for composing the 2016 Doom soundtrack, is also on board to compose this game. Time will tell if the studio lives up to its lofty previous work, but at the very least, every trailer has been entertaining. Here's hoping the game is even half as fun when it comes to PlayStation and Xbox consoles (as well as Game Pass on day one) and PC next year.

BY BLAKE HESTER

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Focus Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Mundfish **RELEASE** February 21

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SILENT HILL F

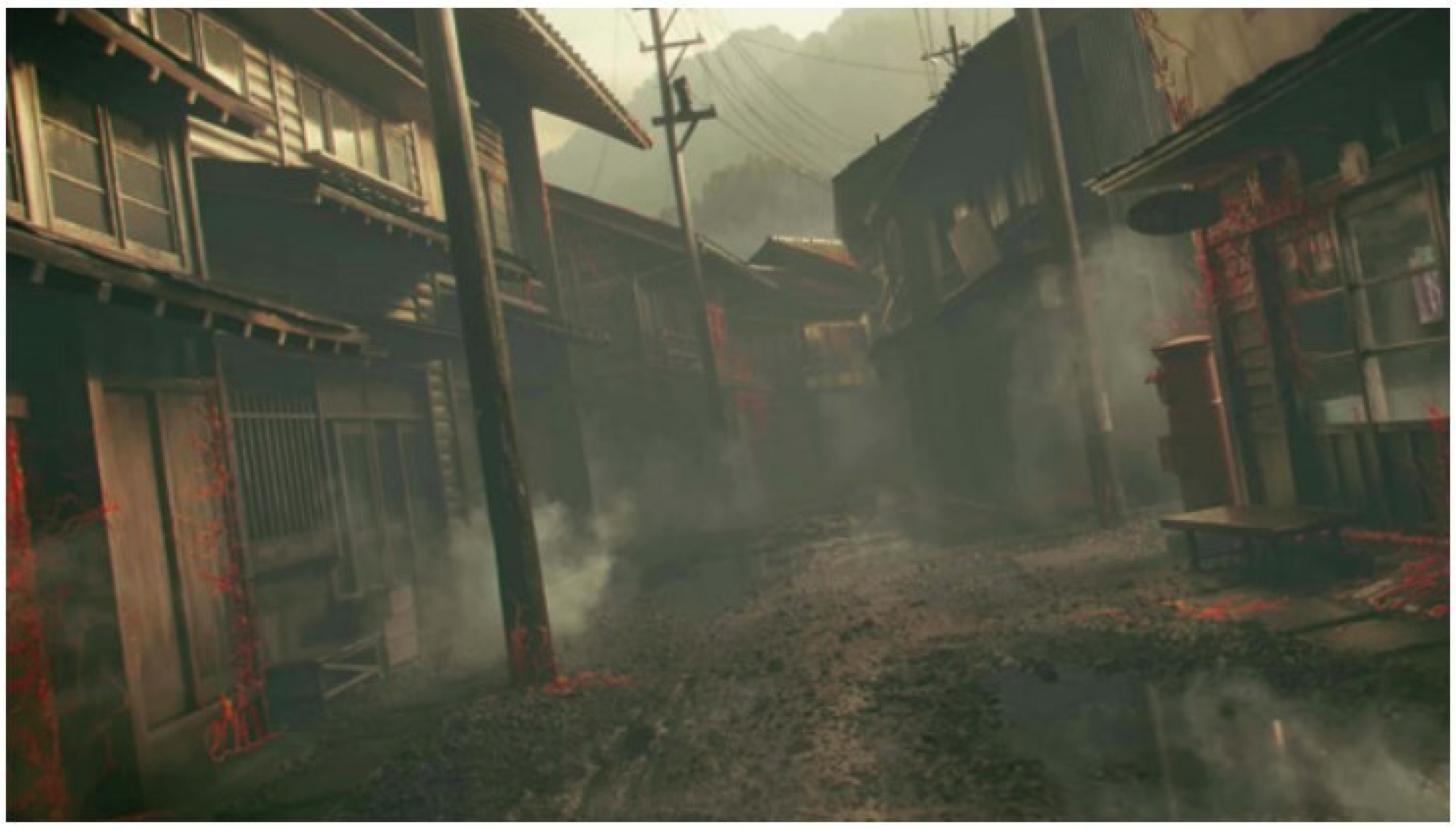
Konami finally returns to the foggy town

Rumors have been perpetuated for years about what is happening with Silent Hill, Konami's psychological survival horror series that was once synonymous with the genre. After Silent Hill 3, it moved around to various developers and platforms, and briefly landed in the hands of Hideo Kojima before it disappeared into the fog. That all changed recently when Konami announced three new Silent Hill games, a Silent Hill movie, and a remake of Silent Hill 2 (which you can read about on the next page).

Finally remaking Silent Hill 2 is exciting for obvious reasons, and two of the other upcoming Silent Hill games, Townfall and Ascension, appear to be smaller side projects. Arguably the most interesting announcement was for Silent Hill f. We know little about this new title, but it's safe to assume it should be considered the next mainline game.

The pre-rendered footage for the announcement shows Japan in the 1960s – a unique setting for a Silent Hill game, as the other entries have taken place in the United States. We see foggy rice fields, a town, and a young female student walking through the alleys. She is dragging a gigantic pipe along the ground before red vines and flowers start growing and grabbing her. From there, the trailer cuts to a shallow lake where the young woman has been overtaken by red flowers. She lifts her head, sheds a single tear, and then her face peels off and falls to the ground.

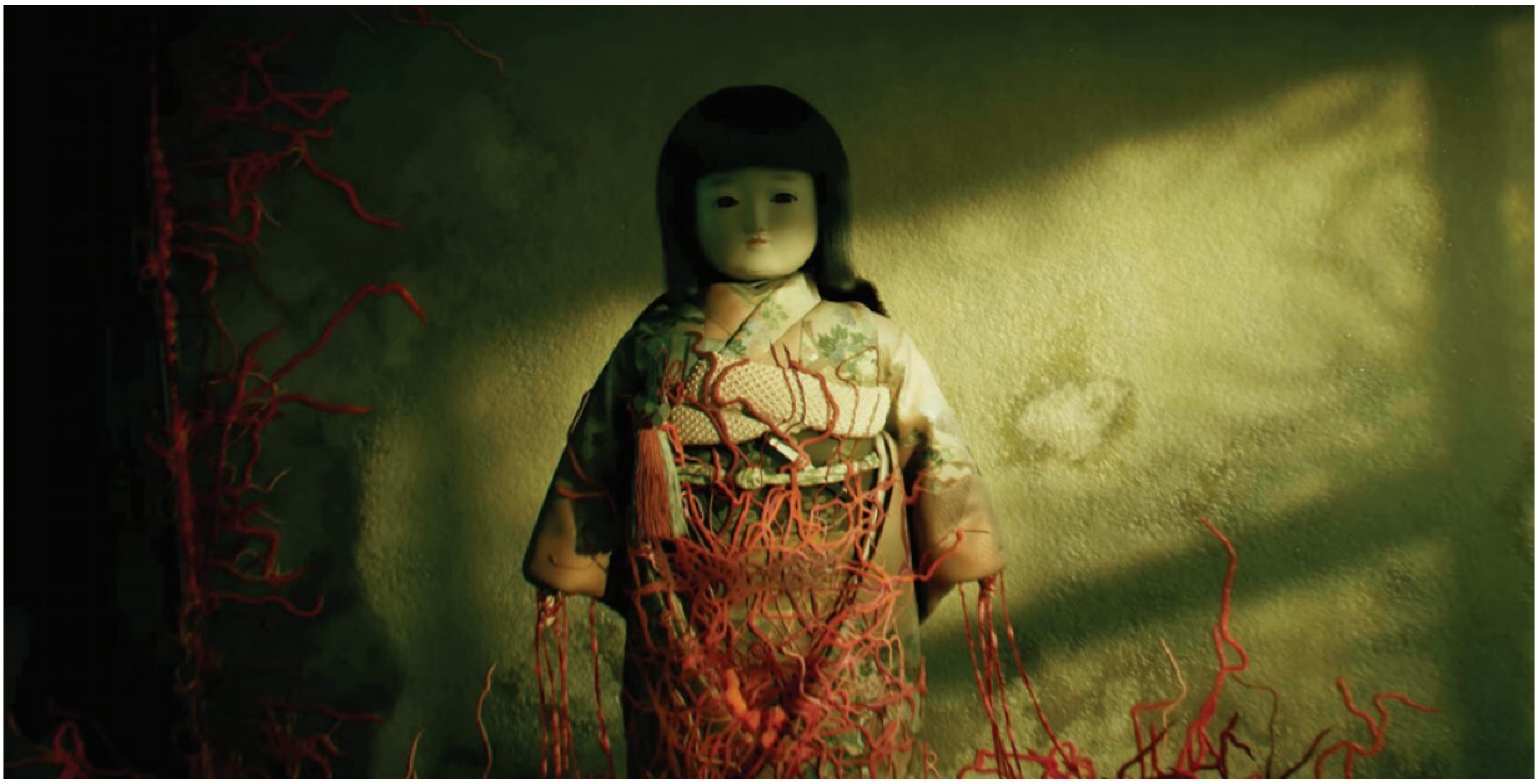
The game's story is being written by Ryukishi07, known in Japan for their horror visual novels. Creature and character designs are being provided by kera, known for their work on the survival game Spirit Hunter: NG. Motoi Okamoto, who has a history with Nintendo, is producing the game. NeoBards Entertainment, which previously worked on Resident Evil Re:Verse, is the developer.



Considering the '60s setting, it's possible Silent Hill f will explore the genesis of the titular town. At the very least, it will explore the mythos that existed before the protagonist of the first Silent Hill game, Harry Mason, explored the town in search of his daughter. An interesting element of the first games in the series was the way they examined Americana through a Japanese horror lens, so it will be interesting to explore a foggy town on the other side of the world sometime in the future.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

PLATFORM TBD **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Konami
DEVELOPER NeoBards Entertainment **RELEASE** 2023



SILENT HILL 2

In my restless dreams, I see that town

When Silent Hill 2 was originally released in 2001, it was a revelation in horror game narrative. There were monsters to fight and guns to use, but protagonist James Sunderland's story was more personal and explored the moral gray area of the relationship with his departed wife. Follow-up Silent Hill games have struggled to live up to that legacy, and it doesn't help that Konami has not made the game easy to revisit over the years. It has given Silent Hill 2 an impressive and mysterious reputation, which is why it's not surprising that the long-rumored remake is finally official.

The game is being developed by Polish studio Bloober Team, known for creating horror games clearly inspired by the Silent Hill series, like The Medium, Layers of Fear, and more. Bloober Team isn't tackling the remake alone, however. Konami is involved, as are at least two original developers. Masahiro Ito, who did the monster concept art for the original release, and composer Akira Yamaoka, who is primarily known for his unique Silent Hill soundtracks but also worked on The Medium, are helping on the remake to some degree.

The trailer for the game showcased fully reworked and modernized visuals. James Sunderland looks different but retains his consistently sullen expression. Sunderland is a man struggling with his past and what happened to his wife, and that struggle appears to still be present behind his eyes, even if he looks like a different person.

The footage also showed iconic scenes from the original game, like the first time James encounters Pyramid Head and when he is introduced by looking in the mirror of a rest stop bathroom.

Bloober Team has confirmed the game is a full remake as opposed to a reskin or visual upgrade. The gameplay looks different, but in a familiar setting, and footage was shown of the game's cutscenes being reperformed on a motion capture stage. The remake's creative director and lead designer Mateusz Lenart said, "While we want to achieve the same end result, players' expectations evolve over time, and certain things need to be modernized to have the same or similar effect." The combat will feel different, and the camera now rests over James' shoulder like in contemporary third-person games, as opposed to the camera following him from behind to show his full body as it used to.

We won't know how much Bloober Team has changed the game until it releases next year, but hopefully the psychological impact of the original remains for the new version.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

Follow Game Informer on Twitch to watch our full, ongoing playthrough of the original Silent Hill

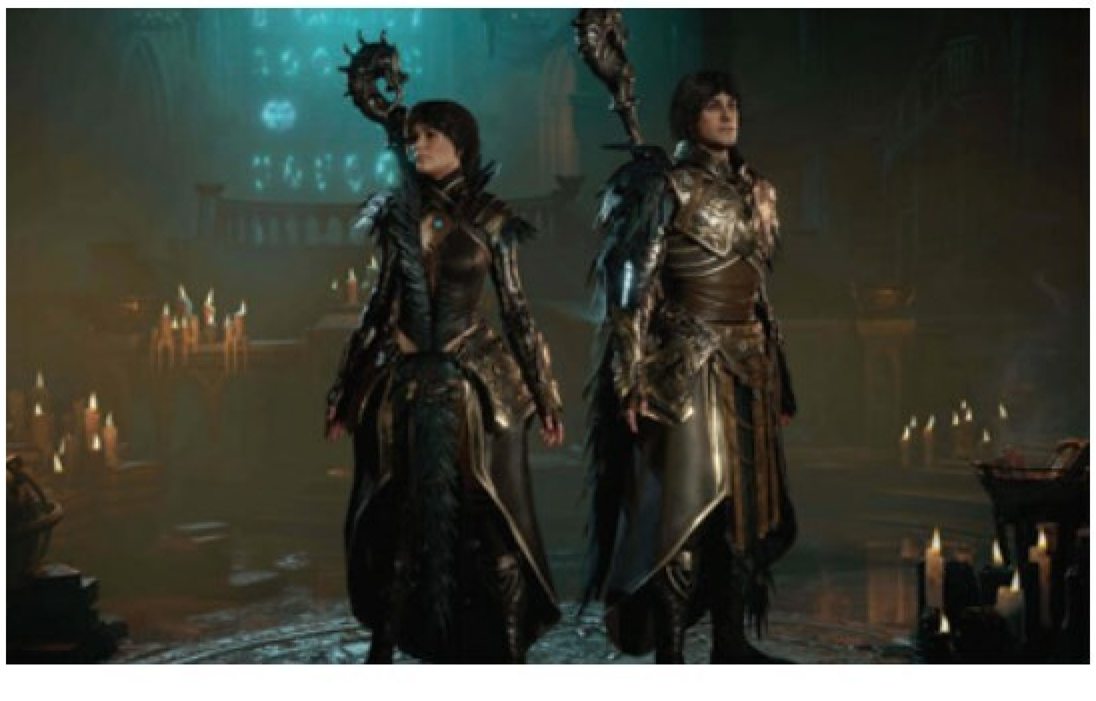
PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Konami **DEVELOPER** Bloober Team
RELEASE 2023

DIABLO IV

Trekking into darkness

In Blizzard's words, Diablo IV signifies a "return to darkness." That mission statement speaks not only to the game's re-adoption of the grim, heavy-metal fire and brimstone aesthetic that defined the first two entries but also to the gameplay's philosophical stance. Diablo IV's threats are dangerous and numerous, requiring new tricks and increased character customization to deal with them. After spending several hours roaming a large slice of the game's opening zones, I'm impressed by how these tweaks add fun flexibility to an already strong foundation.

An unsurprisingly impressive opening cinematic sets the table for my adventure. The demon Lilith, Daughter of Hatred, has returned to the mortal plane in an extended scene that, without spoiling specifics, effectively showcases Diablo IV's more mature tone right away. It's bloody, it's violent, and it's not something you want to put in front of the young'uns. This introduction also showcases Diablo IV's increased focus on cinematic storytelling. This entry features the most cutscenes, in-game and rendered, in series history. The plot unfolds decades after the events of Diablo III, and while fans can expect encounters with some returning faces, Blizzard states that newcomers won't have to cram years of established lore to understand what's happening.



I begin by customizing my hero, choosing from three of the game's five classes: Barbarian, Sorceress, and Rogue. Since I like to hit things really hard, I choose Barbarian. Upon loading into the dreary world, I'm impressed with the weighty feel of my sword attacks. In a game about mowing down scores of foes semi-mindlessly, the act of doing so feels noticeably better than it has in past installments. The addition of an evade maneuver adds a small but much-needed element of nimbleness, letting me quickly (and thoughtfully since it's on a cooldown) escape surrounding mobs.

Deep skill trees and the ability to respec point-by-point let me create a unique bleed build while encouraging experimentation. You can now layer passive skills atop active ones, allowing you to dish out additional punishment or status effects with a given attack. Equipping new skill-based loot even lets you use perks still locked in the skill tree.

It doesn't take long before the gigantic, seamless open world invites me to explore. Diablo IV features non-linear progression; I spotted multiple campaign quests I could tackle in any order. Doing so became hard as I found myself regularly sidetracked by a ton of optional dungeons, from single-room cellars to massive labyrinths. I had a blast relieving these areas of their loot. Slaughtering everything in the room is the usual order of the day, but Blizzard says the game also includes plenty of non-combat puzzle-solving and unique objectives to keep dungeons from becoming repetitive murder fests.

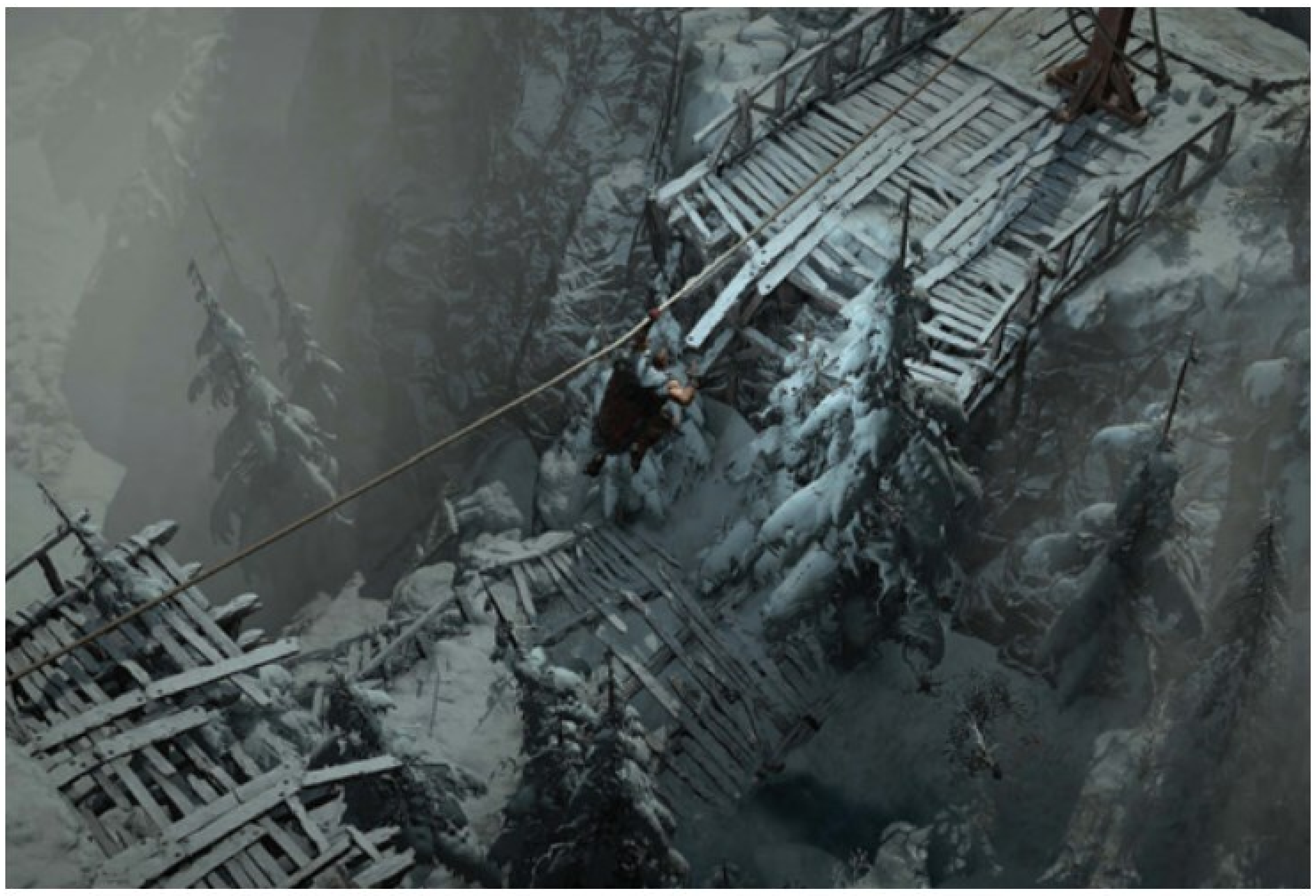
Diablo IV's always-online shared world allows players from around the globe to adventure together or battle each other. You can still enjoy the entire game solo, though, and Blizzard assures that you won't see hundreds of people cluttering the world map and breaking your immersion. Beyond social hubs such as towns or public events (in which you still only see smaller batches of players), you will likely only sporadically encounter someone else since zones have different instances with divided player counts. Blizzard says it did this to avoid MMO-style occurrences; don't expect mobs of players lining up at a quest-giver, for example. You can create private parties for friends and, of course, explore together in couch co-op. The game also adjusts its enemy scaling for players of different levels; if you're lower level, you'll only face enemies near your ranking despite having a higher-level teammate.

Diablo IV's live-service structure means it features the genre's familiar progression trappings. In addition to receiving seasonal updates over its lifetime, numerous in-game meters, such as passive upgrades, fill whenever you do just about anything. Killed over 100 skeletons? You've earned a fancy title. Swing a two-handed sword a lot? A weapon expertise meter means you'll keep getting better at swinging similar swords. It's tough to deny the satisfaction of ticking so many boxes while playing, and it feels like a natural fit for the game.

Upon completing the hefty campaign (which Blizzard estimates will take players 40-50 hours), a substantial endgame opens up. This includes the Paragon Board, a suite of supplementary boosts that unlock once you hit the level 100 cap. Nightmare dungeons and other challenges also await. With so much packed into the game, new and old, Blizzard wants Diablo IV to be the "greatest representation of a Diablo game." It appears to be on the right track from what I played, and I'm excited to see how Blizzard sharpens the edges for the full release.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Blizzard Entertainment
DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment **RELEASE** 2023



FORSPOKEN

Cuffing season in Athia

I've been excited about Forspoken since its reveal as Project Athia in 2020. On paper, it's precisely the type of action/RPG I play. After recently going hands-on with it for a few hours, I'm excited for January, even if I still have some reservations.

This preview session focused solely on the story, with the development team encouraging me to follow the golden path through Forspoken's second, third, and fifth chapters. In Chapter 2, Frey arrives in Athia, unaware of how or why. She's from New York City and struggles to trust anyone. She struggles to trust anything, too, including a talking vambrace on her arm she names Cuff. The dynamic between Frey and Cuff stands out to me.

There is a moment where Cuff gets on Frey's nerves, and she tells him to shut up, adding, "You're f---ing stupid," which made me chuckle. Frey's fish-out-of-water personality is by the books, but her initial selfishness makes for some funny moments. Over time, she grows attached to Athia and its plight against the corruption, or the Break as Frey calls it, turning what was once a peaceful land into a place filled with mindless and dangerous monsters. But her inital apprehension about getting inolved is understandable.

One of my biggest surprises is the dialogue, mostly void of the shotgun blasts of cringe heard in recent trailers. There were a few, but Forspoken spreads them out enough that it feels more organic. And getting to know Frey as a character, these types of lines make sense, love it or hate it.

After a quick tutorial, I make my way toward Cipal, Athia's capital and the last secure bastion. I fight a few enemies before encountering a dragon boss. The combat is quite challenging at this point. Getting used to a magic-only combat system is strange, and it took a few hours to adjust. But it clicked when the spells at my disposal opened, and I realized that while every combative move is magic, each of these spells translates to a mechanic I'm familiar with in other games. One of my spells is a medium-range string of rocks that shoots from my hands like a machine gun. Another is an explosion of stones – a grenade. I have a shield spell, too.

Later, when I unlock new fire-based magic, I gain access to a fiery sword that gives me the short-range attacks I needed and a magical spear for long-range coverage. The combat felt unnatural initially, but I can see the 100-plus spells at Frey's disposal turning into a fun and strategic system rewarding various playstyles.

Soon after I defeat the dragon and arrive at Cipal, Frey is dubbed a heretic, likely the one behind the corruption, and placed in a prison cell. But Auden Keen, a local whose father had been studying the phenomena that brought Frey to Athia, breaks her out of jail. She tasks me with finding more of her father's journals.

After leaving, I return to Cipal and discover Tanta Sila, a former protector of the realm who is now evil, threatening to kill Auden for freeing me. This confrontation ends with a boss fight against a valkyrie-esque being that feels like a typical arena-style fight against a lowly boss. It was quick and easy, but still fun. Soon after, I'm en route to Sila's castle to fight the real deal.

On the way, I use various parkour abilities to traverse the mountainous landscape. The parkour looks flashy,

but feels unattached. You essentially hold Circle while moving, and Frey does the rest. It may become more hands-on later in the game, but right now, the parkour isn't exciting when moving around Athia. Nonetheless, I sprint and leap my way to Sila.

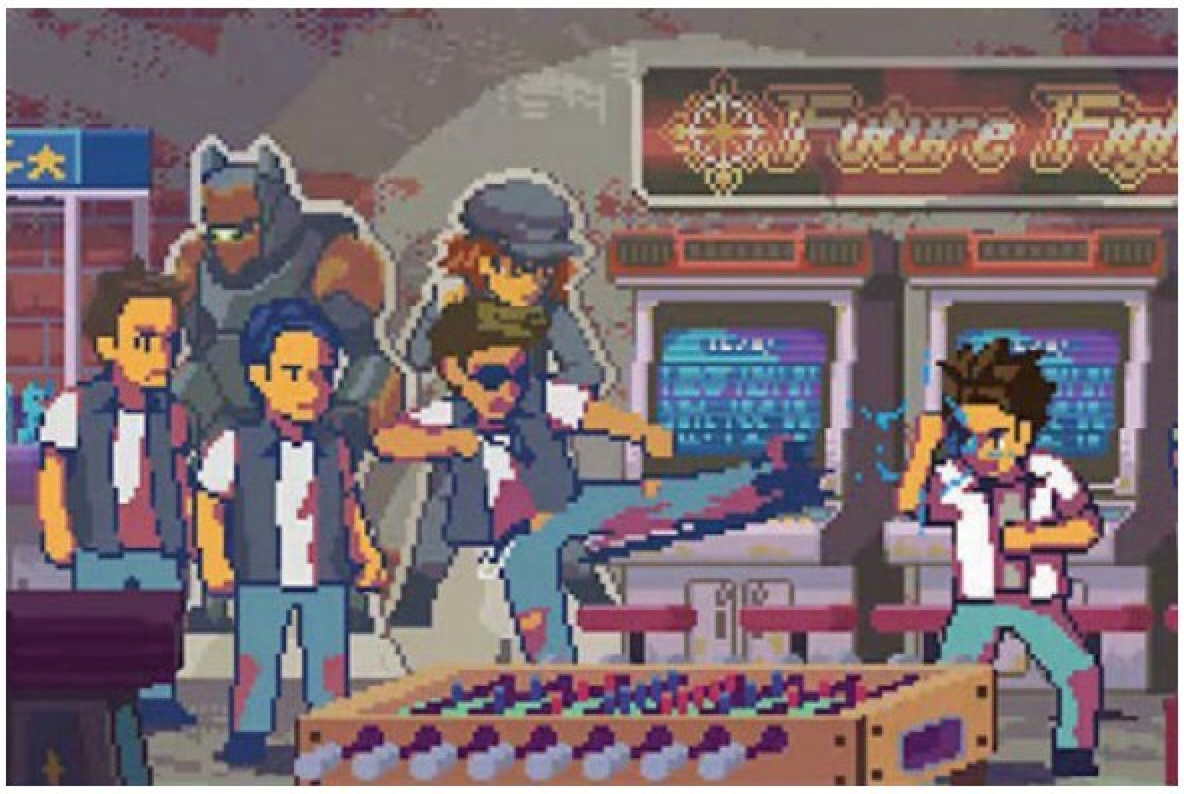
My fight against Sila is fun, but like the dragon and valkyrie boss before her, par for the course. It's not doing anything new, but Frey's parkour abilities and various magical spells are a fun addition to this typical arena-style boss fight. Visually, it's excellent. Frey's purple earth-based spells clash well with Sila's fiery orange magic, and I'm excited to see what other magical combos will come from possibly fighting the other three now-corrupt Tanta protectors.

I wish the rest of Forspoken's visuals excited me as much, though. Athia, or at least the starting area I played around in, is uninspired, coming off as generic. The characters look strange, too, more mannequin-like than anything else. There are still a little under two months to go before Forspoken's release, and perhaps this build I played is months old, so I'm hopeful the final product looks graphically better than this preview. At the very least, if the visuals struggle at launch, there's fun to be had with Forspoken's combat and characters.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Luminous Productions Games, Square Enix
RELEASE January 24

A SPACE FOR THE UNBOUND

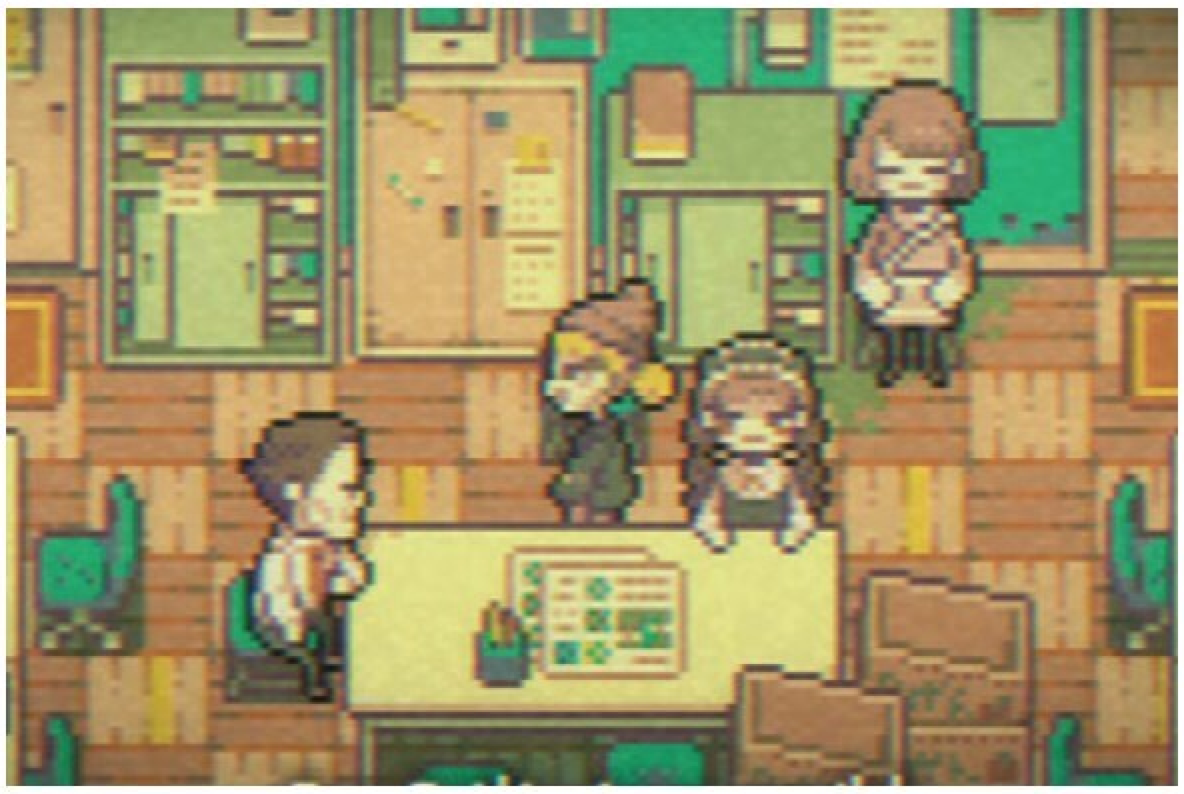


This slice-of-life adventure stars two high school sweethearts, one of whom has the power to read minds. Supernatural threats terrorize their rural Indonesian town, and it's up to the couple to stop it. Gameplay involves talking with townsfolk and exploring their thoughts to learn secrets about themselves and the town. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Toge Productions
DEVELOPER Mojiken **RELEASE** January 19

GOODBYE WORLD

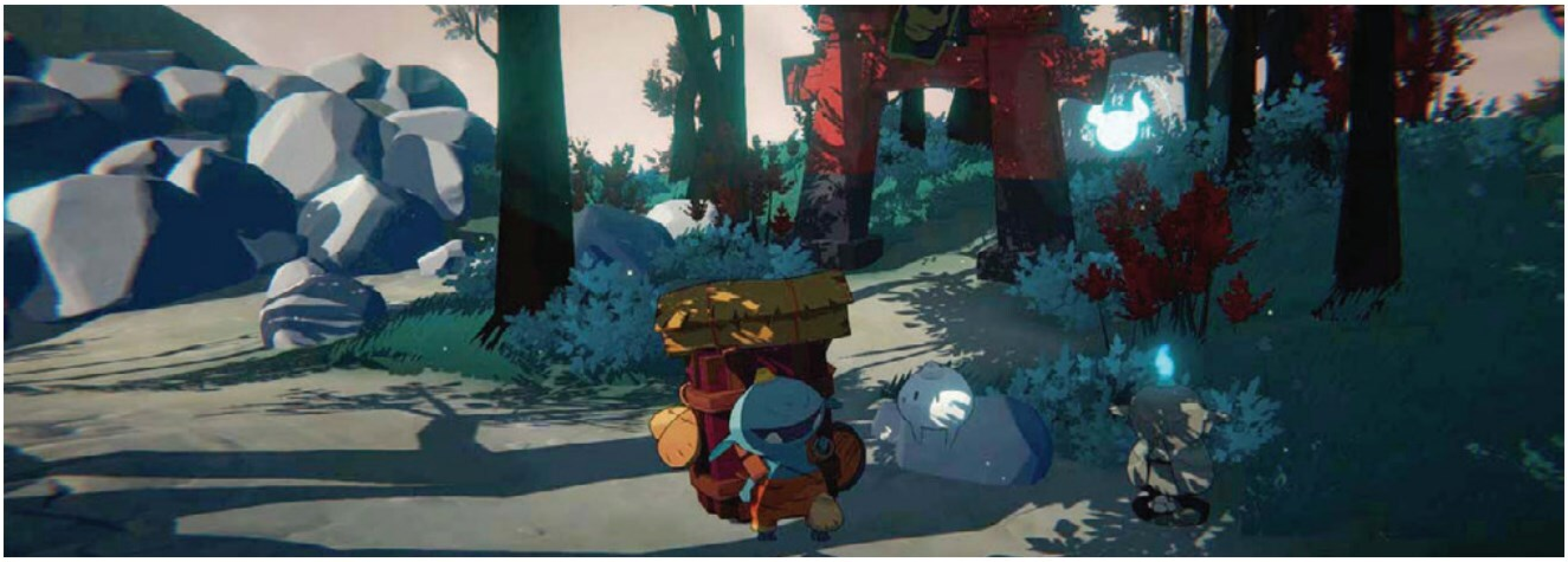
Part narrative adventure, part 2D platformer, Goodbye World stars two indie game designers coping with the financial struggles of making games. The pair works odd jobs to make ends meet, though one of them enjoys a Game Boy-esque platformer for inspiration and escapism. A cute aesthetic juxtaposes the story's sobering tale of chasing passion. **BY MARCUS STEWART**



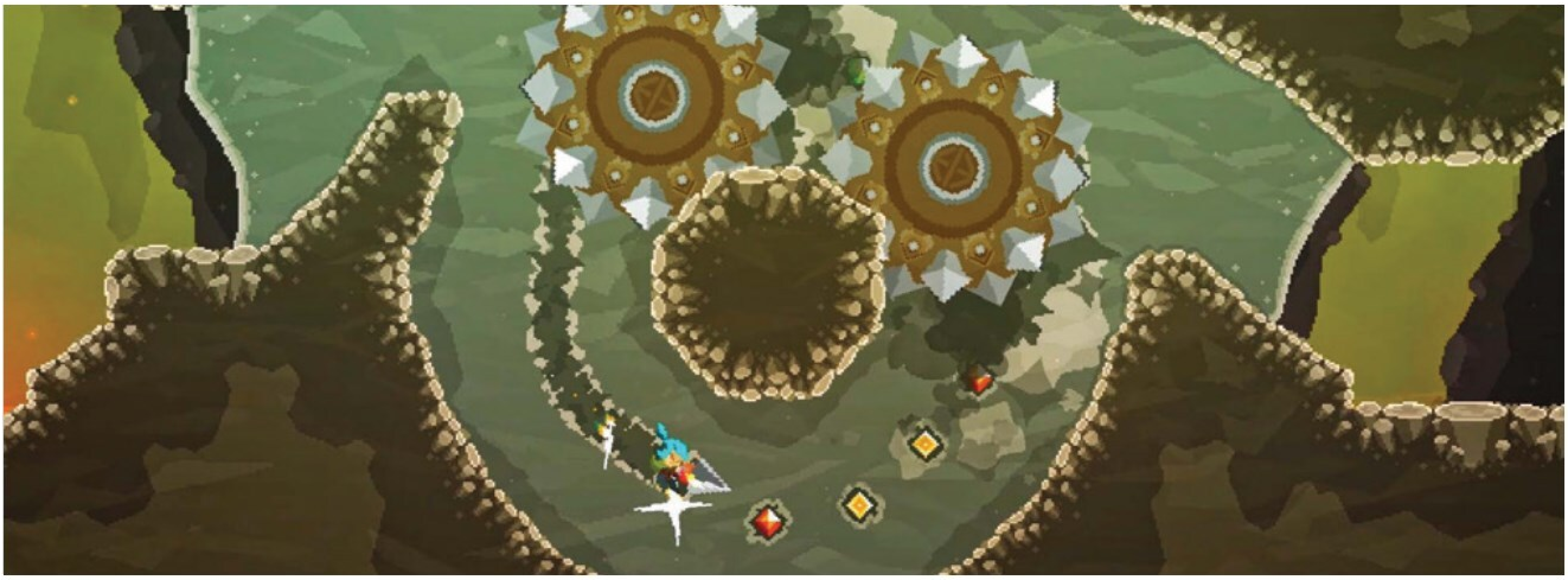
PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER PM Studios, Inc. **DEVELOPER** Isolation Studio
RELEASE 2023

ONI: ROAD TO BE THE MIGHTIEST ONI

This single-player action game gives players simultaneous control of a warrior, Kuuta, and his spirit companion, Kazemaru. You'll tag team enemies by smashing them with melee attacks and absorbing their souls to finish them off. Oni takes place on a large, open island filled with otherworldly foes and secrets ripe for discovery. **BY MARCUS STEWART**



PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Clouded Leopard Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Kenei Design **RELEASE** March 9



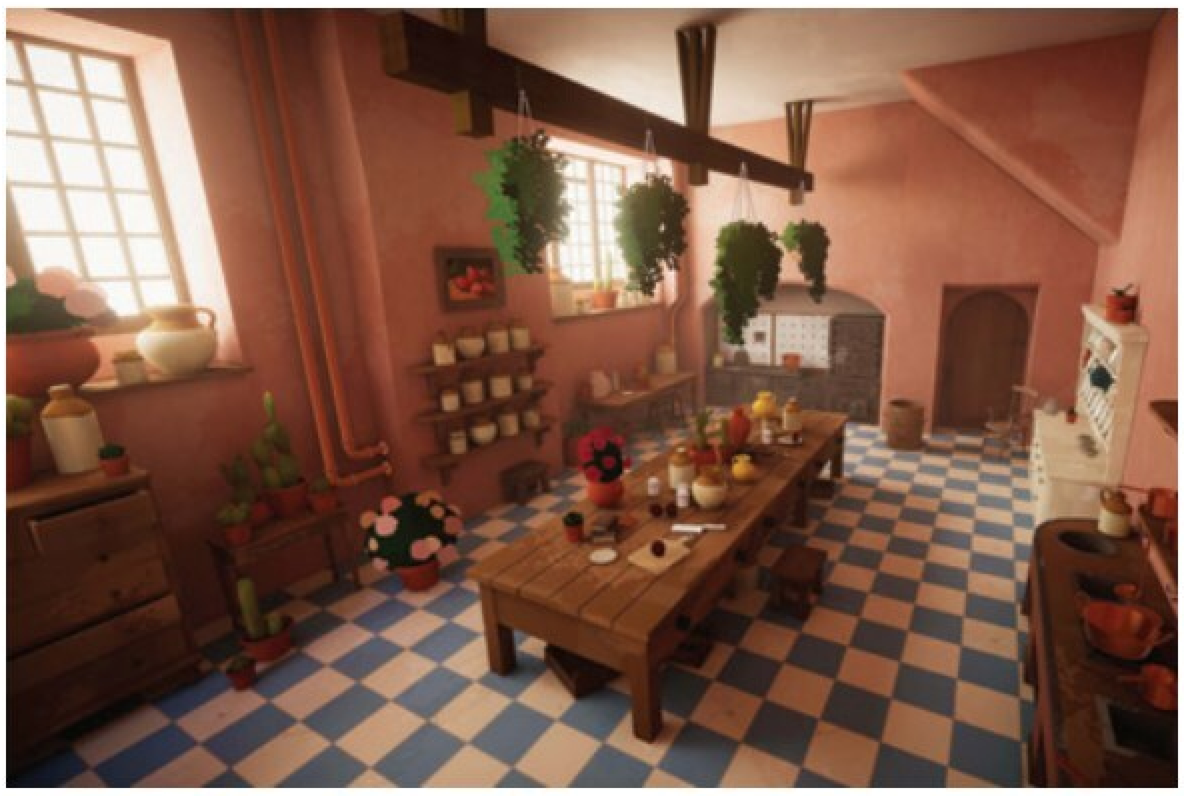
PEPPER GRINDER

In Pepper Grinder you play as Pepper, a treasure hunter packing a giant drill she uses to reclaim her stolen riches. Players grind through colorful, obstacle-laden stages, collecting gems and obliterating enemies along the way. Pepper Grinder's fluid animation looks great, as does its retro-inspired action.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** Ahr Ech **RELEASE** 2023

BOTANY MANOR



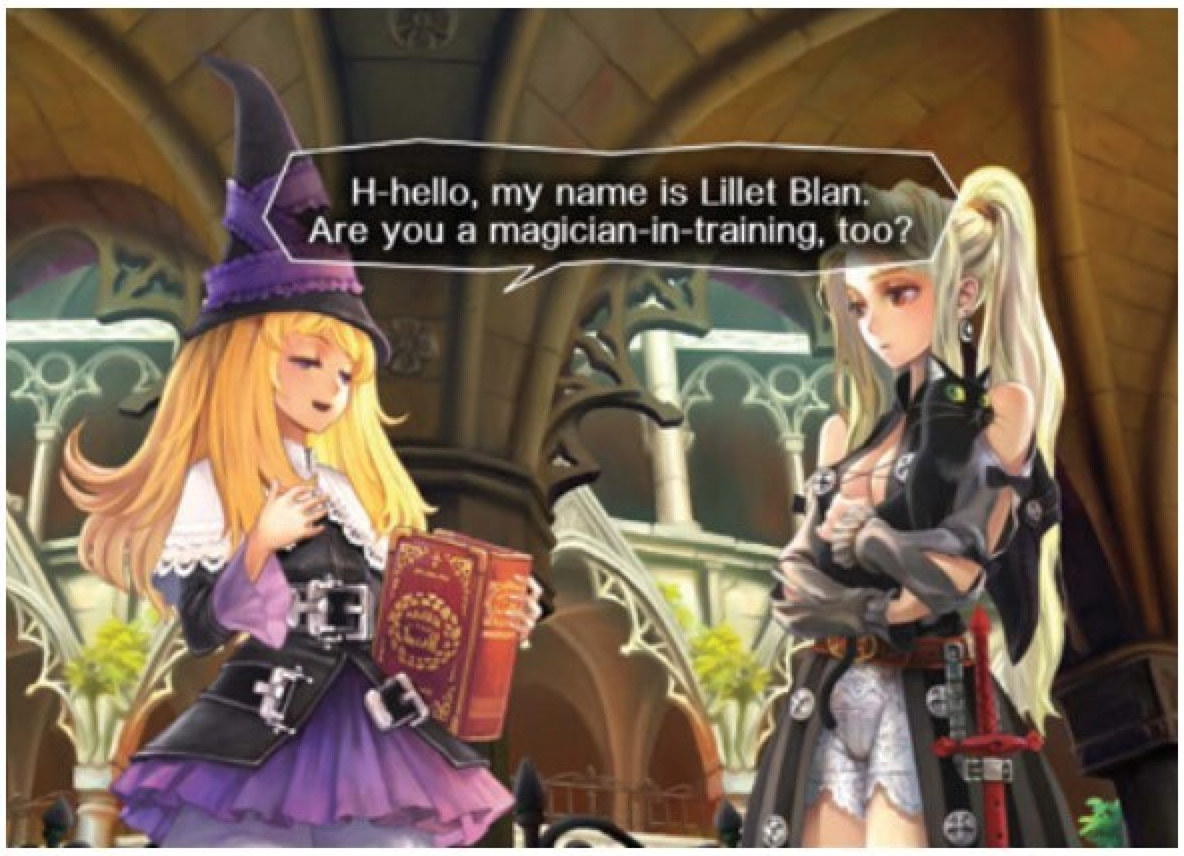
As a 19th-century English botanist, explore a mansion by solving puzzles revolving around plants. Botany Manor's color palette and mysterious vibe evoke games like The Witness. Tasks involve finding and planting seeds, then locating the ideal habitats to grow them. Discovering this information requires the inspection of scattered clues throughout the manor.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle **PUBLISHER** Whitehorn Digital
DEVELOPER Balloon Studios **RELEASE** 2023

GRIMGRIMOIRE ONCEMORE

Following the recent success of 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim, developer Vanillaware is remastering GrimGrimoire, its 2007 PlayStation 2 title. Lillet Blan is a student at Silver Star Tower, a magical academy that hides a dark mystery. Using its magical real-time strategy combat system, Lillet will fend off monsters and uncover secrets in Spring 2023. **BY CHARLES HARTE** ■



H-hello, my name is Lillet Blan.
Are you a magician-in-training, too?

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy **PUBLISHER** Nippon Ichi Software **DEVELOPER** Vanillaware **RELEASE** Spring 2023

Reviews

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GI MUST PLAY

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

Super-powered strategy

↘ images
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Play enough games, and you start to develop an eye for the ones that are going to ask a lot of your time and focus. Within minutes, I knew Firaxis' comic book-powered adventure with the Marvel superheroes would be one of those games, filled as it is with numerous currencies, cosmetics, and gameplay systems. Midnight Suns is a strategy/RPG of tremendous depth, character development in both storytelling and upgrades, and many dozens of hours of gameplay to uncover. While the repetitive nature of the storytelling structure is sometimes a chore, the combat is top-notch. It injects the slow-paced XCOM tactical experience Firaxis is known for with a gamma-powered boost, leading to rewarding battles that stay fresh even after you've sunk countless hours into the experience.

An ancient evil has awoken, threatening to plunge the world into the darkness of an Elder God's malice. Familiar heroes like Iron Man, Doctor Strange, Ghost Rider, and Captain Marvel have no choice but to resurrect the long-dead Hunter who once defeated the threat hundreds of years earlier. You control this revived hero as they lead Earth's mightiest against the danger.

Combat follows the turn-based tactical loop of Firaxis' XCOM games but abandons giant battlefields and cover points for tighter arenas and a card-based action selection inspired by deck-building gameplay. Each character has an array of card attacks, skills, and heroic abilities that leverage their unique talents, and it's tremendously fun to stack each character deck to greater heights of dominance.

While there's plenty of time to consider each move carefully, the action feels more bombastic and faster moving than most tactical games. Every card has a unique animation accentuating the character's uniqueness, and the battles look beautiful as they play out. Wolverine surges back from a KO with renewed power. Magik's portals send enemies hurtling across the field. Captain America flings his shield to bounce between hapless Hydra forces, taunting them to take him on. And everyone leaps over barriers, hurling boulders and blasting explosive barrels to add to the chaos – just like any good cinematic superhero fight.

The complexity of this system grows over time, gradually layering in objectives you might need to confront, or unique enemy mechanics you must overcome. You might be asked to damage a helicopter before it takes off, or confront a demon who summons forth obelisks every turn that must be smashed if you don't want to be overwhelmed. Get deep enough into the game, and you even start to see some fascinating puzzle challenges crop up, where you must complete a particular task using only certain cards or other constraints. Firaxis built a robust and exciting combat engine and leveraged many ways to keep it engaging and new.

In between battles, you return to the Abbey, a sprawling social and exploration space. Here, you can upgrade and train your heroes, build new combat items, and unlock an impressive array of cosmetic tweaks for characters and home décor. The grounds of the Abbey also house a mystically infused adventure game of secret clues, arcane treasure chests, and story snippets about the past; it leads to some intriguing discoveries but can sometimes distract from the flow of the main story.

The Abbey also acts as a giant friendship simulation, where you gradually play out interpersonal dramas with the likes of Spider-Man and Blade. The dialogue selections (and the option to choose light or dark conversation responses) is most reminiscent of BioWare games like Dragon Age or Knights of the Old Republic, and can sometimes come across as overly simplistic. A metric ton of these interactions unfold over the course of the game; each builds your status with these individuals, which in turn reflects in their abilities during combat. I mostly enjoyed the focus on character development. But with a game this big, I eventually tired of the rote loop of conversations after every mission, some of which devolve into dull dialogue exchanges that would be more at home in a reality TV show than a superhero adventure.

For all its focus on supernatural magic and demonic threats, Midnight Suns is a fun-loving and thrilling ride. XCOM strategy fans won't be disappointed; the format changes still result in a gratifying combat flow. But this is a more approachable and story-driven experience than Firaxis has previously attempted, filled with some of the most recognizable pop culture heroes of the moment. It's big, boisterous, and a little bit silly at times, but just like the best of Marvel's output in recent years, it's also a rousing good time. **BY MATT MILLER**

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing/Strategy **PUBLISHER** 2K Games **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games
RELEASE December 2 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC), TBA (PS4, Xbox One, Switch) **RATING** T

POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET

The struggles of evolution

Each new generation of Pokémon promises changes and iterations to the long-standing formula. Pokémon Scarlet and Violet kick off the ninth generation of Pokémon games, offering some of the biggest changes to date. An open world, four-player co-op, and other additions effectively push the series forward in meaningful ways, but the technical shortcomings often break immersion and temper an otherwise strong Pokémon game.

The Pokémon formula remains mostly intact through Scarlet and Violet. Your main goals still involve catching, training, and battling the Pokémon inhabiting the world. But this time, you do so in the series' first true open world, expanding the formula in unprecedented ways. The Paldea region is ripe for exploration, with diverse biomes and various nooks and crannies in which to hunt. Thanks to a wide swath of Pokémon, new and old species alike, I always felt rewarded for journeying off the beaten path. When I did discover an all-new monster, I often appreciated the design, making this batch one of my favorite new generations in a long time.

Thanks to this open-world approach, most battles are now optional. Trainers occupy the world, but you must initiate the battle with them to start. I like this approach, as it let me skip fights I wouldn't otherwise want to be in, though the rewards often make them worthwhile. The same could be said of wild Pokémon encounters, which only happen if you run into them; random encounters are completely gone this time around. You can also use the new Let's Go mechanic, where you send your lead Pokémon out to auto-battle, if you're just looking for quick experience and crafting materials.

Unfortunately, the larger world comes at a cost, as Pokémon Scarlet and Violet suffer from poor performance across the board. Characters pop in and out of existence before your eyes, textures appear in extremely low resolution, and the frame rate stutters around every turn. Game Freak shot for the stars with its first truly open world, but it's clear it still has a ways to go when it comes to making it work on Switch.

Once you're in battle, longtime Pokémon players will feel right at home, as it reverts to the traditional turn-based format where type strengths and weaknesses create compelling rock-paper-scissors-style matchups. The new Terastallization mechanic, where an in-battle Pokémon takes on a gem-like appearance and boosts moves of its specific Tera Type, accentuates the type match-up system; some Pokémon even change type when they're Terastallized, adding an extra layer of strategy. The Terastallized forms look uniformly goofy, but Terastallization is my favorite generational battle gimmick in series history.

Players can explore this new, open Paldea region together thanks to four-player cooperative play. Once players join the host's instance, they can freely explore, catch new Pokémon, battle in Tera Raids, and even trade with each other. I'm sad there aren't more interactions between players in these sessions, but the freedom offered by co-op outweighs the shortcomings.

The open-world design also enables you to choose the order in which you approach the three main questlines. Victory Road offers the series' traditional eight-gym conquest with the goal of taking down the Elite Four, while Starfall Street lets you attack bases held by Team Star, the rival group of this entry. Gym challenges preceding each leader battle diversify the lead up, but they're either mundane or revert to the traditional trainer-gauntlet style. Team Star base assaults are easy affairs, where you need to use the Let's Go mechanic to defeat 30 Pokémon in 10 minutes before an often-challenging boss battle. Path of Legends, a third questline, grants engaging battles against huge Titan Pokémon, provides the best rewards, and serves up a touching story. I enjoyed each individual questline, and while they're disparate in nature, they converge in the meaningful end and postgame content.

Despite technical shortcomings and some filler content, Pokémon Scarlet and Violet are chock-full of meaningful additions to one of gaming's most popular franchises. At worst, these games are steps towards the Pokémon games for which players have clamored, but more often, they serve as effective thesis statements for where the series goes from here. Either way, I can't wait to see where Game Freak evolves the experience from this point. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8.25

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER The Pokémon Company, Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Game Freak
RELEASE November 18 **RATING** E

SONIC FRONTIERS

Into the wild blue yonder

In Sonic Frontiers, Sega finds the intersection of the series' linear past and its "open-zone" future, paying capable service to both eras. The open Starfall Islands offer engaging exploration, while the linear Cyber Space stages deliver the familiar speed-based Sonic experience. Though each side of the coin has faults, Frontiers is an overall positive experience that serves as a boost in the right direction for the franchise.

Running through the open zones is often a joyful experience. Sonic controls remarkably well as he runs through the lush fields, sandy straights, and other biomes I encountered during my 30-hour playthrough. The islands deliver terrific playgrounds through which Sonic grinds, boosts, and bounces. The satisfaction is accentuated by the tight 3D gameplay.

The most notable new ability in Sonic's arsenal is Cyloop, a blue trail you activate with a push of a button. Cyloop has utility in combat, but its primary use is in exploration. I like this mechanic overall, but reasons to use it in the world sometimes felt shoehorned.

On top of that, several areas of the open zones aren't optimized for exploration. The in-world obstacle courses are among the worst offenders. I lost track of the number of times I tried to go in one direction, only to hit a dash panel that sent me flying hundreds of feet in the opposite direction. This dilemma is further brought into focus by atrocious pop-in, making it difficult to understand the best way to navigate.

When you're not sprinting between destinations, Sonic Frontiers gives players the most comprehensive combat mechanics in the series' history. You use these tactics against Guardian mini-bosses in the world, novel encounters that require you to use different tactics to win. Defeating Guardians grants Cyber Space Gears, which let you access the linear, more traditional 3D Sonic levels. These stages concentrate the action into bite-sized chunks, often lasting less than a few minutes. Each stage features four objectives that grant a Chaos Emerald Vault Key, the main collectible for progressing the main story.

I loved playing the levels repeatedly to accomplish all these goals; efficiently speedrunning these branching stages is greatly satisfying. However, the S-Rank times are poorly balanced, meaning sometimes I would achieve the time on my first attempt, while others are unrealistic unless you nail a perfect run.

The culmination of each island is a massive boss battle against that area's Titan. Each Titan battle is drastically different, but they all have you facing an impossibly large foe as Super Sonic. Since Sonic's golden form is invincible but slowly depletes rings, the battles are more about beating the clock than worrying about damage. This dynamic often leads to frustration as their projectile spam is meant to delay you, but the epic, over-the-top nature of these battles won me over and provided some of the most memorable moments in the game.

Juxtaposed against the grand scale of these bombastic boss battles, Sonic's adventure is a largely solitary experience. Save for occasional interactions with his friends and a mischievous A.I. character; our hero goes it alone. This sets a contemplative tone that I rather enjoyed despite its seeming opposition to the series' theme of speed.

This tone fits the more somber narrative. The story features some of the best character moments and contextual callbacks in series history; from Sonic 3 to Sonic Forces, diehard fans will love the passing references the characters make to their previous adventures.

Though it's rough around the edges, Sonic Frontiers is the best 3D Sonic game in years. This first attempt at the open-zone concept is an admirable effort, and I can't wait to see how Sonic Team iterates on this formula in future entries. For now, Sonic Frontiers is a solid first foray into a brave new world for Sega's speedy mascot.

BY BRIAN SHEA

7.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sega **DEVELOPER** Sonic Team **RELEASE** November 8 **RATING** E10+

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

Morsels of fun in a far-too-familiar space

Nearly a decade and a half ago, Visceral Games released Dead Space, a now cult-classic survival-horror game inspired by the likes of *Alien* and *The Thing*. If you've ever yearned for a return to its mix of sci-fi and horror, and if you want a near-identical experience to what co-creator Glen Schofield delivered in that fan-favorite horror hit, you're in luck. Schofield's latest, The Callisto Protocol, veers incredibly close to Dead Space, for both better and worse. Unfortunately, though, it's far too familiar. There are glimmers of greatness, namely in its opening hours, but what unfolds after is a tiresome and unsurprising eight hours that feel like a relic of the past.

The Callisto Protocol is set primarily in Black Iron Prison and the surrounding area on one of Jupiter's moons, Callisto. After a crash landing, correctional officers imprison protagonist Jacob Lee and Dani Nakamura in this Prison. Shortly after, the game introduces its unique melee combat system, and it's one of the highlights. Dodging biophage monstrosities by pulling left and right on the control stick is engaging, as are the heavy swings of Jacob's melee attack. Each hit carries a ton of impact and I took down enemies using just his electrified prison baton in a fulfilling way. Guns are later folded into the mix, but they're not as satisfying, nor do they meaningfully differentiate themselves from one another. The telekinesis-like pull-and-throw GRP system is useful and fun, but there's disappointingly little to do with it.

After a few hours, I was predicting most of the story beats in advance, all the while being fed bread crumbs of a larger narrative that led to a fast dump of information in the game's final moments. While Dani's story, which weaves in and out of Jacob's throughout the duration of the game, comes to a satisfying conclusion, Jacob's does not, ending with a scene that feels inorganically enticing and designed to ensure I purchase the upcoming story DLC.

The final boss before this disappointing climax is an exhausting and repetitive fight. Every boss before it left me feeling empty and annoyed at the lack of variance. Most bosses can kill you in one hit, which takes away the earned stress of survival horror. I wasn't desperate to find ammo or a health pack to survive by the skin of my teeth; I was just jogging away to ensure its hits didn't land close to me. Furthering my frustration is a bad checkpoint system that makes both boss fights and standard enemy encounters a chore.

Listening to audio logs, which add small touches of needed flavor to the area you're playing through, frustratingly requires you to stay in the log menu to listen. The death animations are exciting and gruesome, but they lack variety. They're buggy, too, and some death scenes are drastically more interesting to watch play out than others.

Gun animations, which play when switching weapons, look nice at first, but you must agonizingly sit through each to use a new weapon. A unique quick-fire mechanic that auto-locks onto an enemy's weak point at the end of a melee combo is a nice addition to the combat's systems, but if your equipped weapon requires reloading, you hit fire only for nothing to happen, leaving you open for damage. The Callisto Protocol dies by a thousand cuts such as these.

I'm okay with The Callisto Protocol being another version of its spiritual predecessor, but it struggles to nail even the basics. As a result, I'm underwhelmed, annoyed, and disappointed. If you wanted anything more out of this second crack at making a new sci-fi IP in survival horror, or something markedly different that acknowledges just how far gaming has come since 2008, The Callisto Protocol is not your answer. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

6

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Krafton
DEVELOPER Striking Distance Studios **RELEASE** December 2 **RATING** M

MUST PLAY

NEED FOR SPEED UNBOUND

Turning a tight corner

Since its inception nearly three decades ago, Need for Speed's best entries have combined style and substance to produce thrilling homages to the street racing scene. Need for Speed Unbound feels like the ultimate realization of that philosophy, creating one of the franchise's best in years.

Sliding into the driver seat of the nearly 150 cars in Need for Speed Unbound feels terrific. Blasting down a straightaway in a McLaren delivers a remarkable sense of speed but nailing a corner drift in a Mitsubishi feels just as good. Actions like drifting and drafting fill your boost gauge, creating a satisfying rhythm in the moment-to-moment racing as you flow from one move to the next.

Distinct visual effects permeate nearly every moment of Need for Speed Unbound, making it one of the most stylish racing games I've played. Though the city and vehicles maintain their photorealistic looks from past games, the characters are cel-shaded cartoons. These two contrasting styles sound like they should clash, but they work in tandem to create a refreshing amalgamation. Unbound further leans into stylization by adding street-art inspired flourishes to the car as you drift, boost, and jump off ramps. I appreciated the neon-colored smoke during a tight corner, but the tag that pops up when your boost is full sometimes blocked my view during critical points in the race.

As you take to the open streets of the fictional city of Lakeshore, you have a bevy of events from which to choose. You can take part in linear races, lap-based circuits, head-to-head contests, and drifting events – not to mention the various collectibles and challenges scattered throughout the city. These each present exciting challenges, but my favorite event is Takeover, which puts you in a tight course and rewards you for drifting, boosting, hitting ramps, and smashing targets.

Need for Speed Unbound's single-player story centers on a betrayal and subsequent rise up of the city's underground racing scene. While the overarching story is easy to ignore, the constant chatter between the characters accentuates their grating personalities. Rivals repeat hackneyed lines throughout each race, while open-world exploration is often interrupted by calls from your annoying manager or radio segments featuring ham-fisted politician caricatures. After my first few hours, I turned down dialogue in the menu. However, I actively enjoyed hearing from Rydell, the owner of the garage and father figure to your created character, as his conversations deliver some truly earnest moments despite this game's brash style.

Cop chases have long been a critical element of the Need for Speed formula, and Unbound implements them in effective manner. Each event and chase in which you participate raises your heat level for that day, with higher heat spelling more relentless police officers with better vehicles at their disposal. I often left the base model police cruisers in the dust at heat level one, but as the heat ranks climbed and the cops broke out more capable vehicles, tension crept throughout my body as I gripped my controller tighter.

Making it back to a safehouse with high heat can be daunting; I often rerouted my path to avoid kicking off a lengthy chase. Though I usually escaped, the danger of knowing that any money I earned in that session would be lost if I'm apprehended creates adrenaline-fueled affairs. Though the few times I was caught made me want to walk away in frustration, the exhilaration of a high-stakes escape is difficult to match.

Unfortunately, cop chases are absent from the game's online suite. This wouldn't be such a letdown if I could reliably find full events. However, since the online side just dumps you into a Lakeshore instance with 15 other players who seem more interested in exploring the city than racing, the online races themselves are often sparsely populated. Once you're in a race, the servers are stable, and the crossplay works well, but I was disappointed my garage progress in story didn't carry over, leaving me ill-prepared for my early races. Thankfully, the generous reward system let me catch up fast, but I missed the upgraded vehicles to which I grew accustomed from the story.

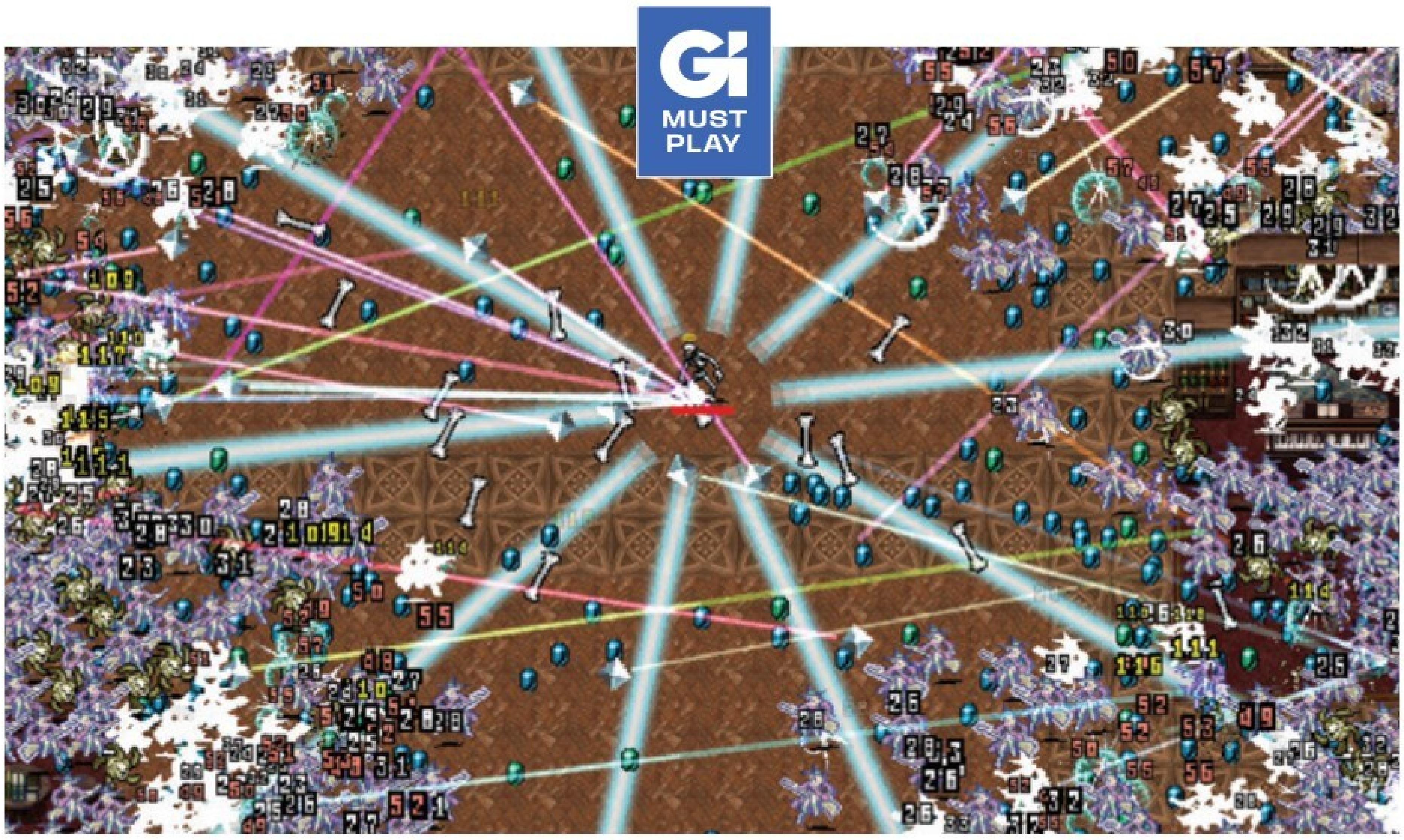
Need for Speed Unbound feels like a foundational entry for where the series could go from here. Competing across the title's many events is a blast, and I love the juxtaposed visual aesthetics. Though some elements left me wanting, Unbound is as much fun as I've had with a Need for Speed title in years. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Racing (16-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER Criterion Games **RELEASE** December 2 **RATING** T

VAMPIRE SURVIVORS

Single-stick masterpiece



Ever since hitting Early Access on Steam last December, the cult of Vampire Survivors has grown and spread its gospel far and wide. Over the past year, the seemingly simple game has expanded with a steady stream of free updates adding astonishing amounts of depth and content. The fantastic gameplay and compelling progression system combined with a ridiculously low price point made Vampire Survivors extremely recommendable. That tradition continues in the full game release, making over 50 hours of pure gaming bliss accessible to a larger audience.

Vampire Survivors starts out simple enough. You only use the left analog stick to move around and your attacks automatically happen at regular intervals. Monsters approach non-stop from all directions as you dodge through the gaps and make sure they're in your attack radius. The Castlevania influence is clear as you start with a whip and take on creepy creatures from classic gaming horror in addition to imaginative original creations. If you can last 30 minutes, Death will swoop in for an instant kill, but you can consider that "beating" the level.

Every attempt starts you at a base level with only your character's starting weapon. While they may seem insufficient at first, almost all offensive options can be built to feel amazing. Blast a firehose of knives in front of you to clear a path. Melt a colony of bats as you wade through them with garlic's circular field. Take shelter in a cloud of fighting cats. Every weapon type I could imagine and several things I would never have dreamed of were all at my fingertips.

You're constantly making decisions, weighing the pros and cons of every randomized item presented during the leveling process. At maximum, you can have six weapons all firing at once in addition to six accessories that modify weapons and gameplay, like increasing the size of projectiles, reducing cooldown time, or increasing the rate of experience gained. Additionally, certain weapon and accessory combos provide ultra-powerful evolutions that can turn the tide at your darkest hour. It's difficult to convey the supreme satisfaction you feel when your incomprehensible barrage of attacks makes it impossible for enemies to hurt you, no matter how hard you try to kick the hornets' nest. I rarely take screenshots or videos of games I'm playing, but Vampire Survivors puts on such a glorious show that I couldn't help but share it.

Developer Poncle has expertly balanced the rollout of unlocks so you're never overwhelmed by the mix of weapons and powers, but you never tire of them either. There's always a new character, weapon, accessory, or mechanic to look forward to all the way to the very end. The initially daunting list of objectives provides a sense of direction and gets you to experiment outside of your comfort zone. In one run, I'd blow it or get a bad shake on level-up options and die without checking off any objectives, but the next I'd have a perfect run and accomplish a dozen tasks. The unlocks/achievements rain down in a gratifying flurry of dopamine hits. Even when you fail, you learn something and gain more gold to unlock permanent upgrades at the in-game shop.

Almost every rule you come to know (including the mechanics already described) gets completely upended or twisted as you progress deeper into the game. Vampire Survivors loves setting your expectations and completely subverting them. At several points, I exclaimed, "What the hell is happening? Wait, so I can do this now?" Everything is built to make it impossible to resist that next run. "Well, I have to see how this crazy-looking new character plays." "What's this unsettling new stage?" "This other strategy has to work. This can't wait until tomorrow."

My only hesitation in recommending it to Xbox players is the unwelcome presence of launch bugs impeding stage and achievement unlocks for some and other strange odds and ends. Patching has helped so far, and I hope it gets to be as relatively issue-free as the PC versions soon.

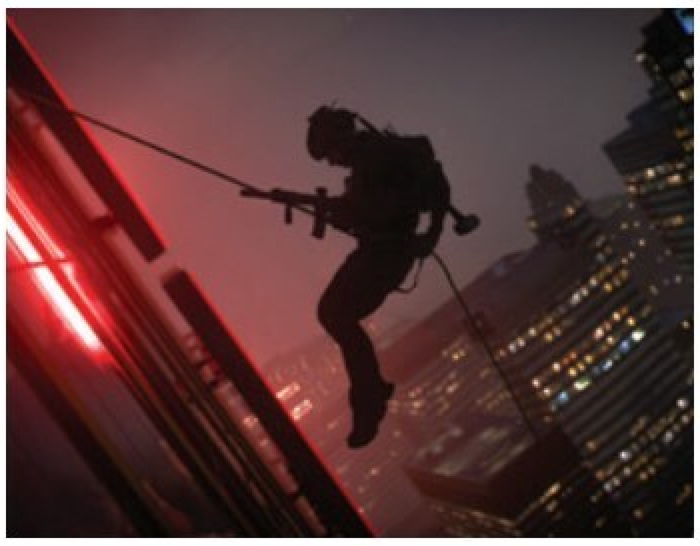
Despite these early console setbacks, Vampire Survivors has quickly become one of my favorite games of all time. Consider this me grabbing the sides of your head and shouting, "Play Vampire Survivors, you fool!" **BY BRYAN VORE**

9.75

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Poncle **DEVELOPER** Poncle
RELEASE October 20 (PC), November 10 (Xbox)
RATING T

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE II

Plenty of people can put up with a bit of ugliness if there's still a pretty good time to be had overall. For Modern Warfare II, the good time offered by its multiplayer and in glimpses within its campaign may be enough. **BY REID MCCARTER**



6.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Shooter (64-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Activision **DEVELOPER** Infinity Ward **RELEASE** October 27 **RATING** M

ATARI 50: THE ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

With Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration, Digital Eclipse has set a new bar for future historical compilations in video games. It's a digital traveling museum exhibit, as the game bursts at the seams with nostalgia thanks to more than 100 playable games and hundreds of relics from the developer's vault. **BY JASON FANELLI**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • Switch • PC • Atari VCS **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Compilation **PUBLISHER** Atari **DEVELOPER** Digital Eclipse **RELEASE** November 11 **RATING** T

CRISIS CORE: FINAL FANTASY VII REUNION

For the ongoing Final Fantasy VII re-examination, Crisis Core feels like required reading. Its place in the larger story is important and will likely grow in significance moving forward, but making your way through those story moments sometimes feels like a school assignment. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

7.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix **RELEASE** November 13 **RATING** T

PENTIMENT

Pentiment is a wonderfully unique storytelling experience overflowing with respect for the historical era it strives to recreate. Much like the game's themes of stories persisting over time, I'll be thinking about Andreas Maler and the town of Tassing for years to come. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

8.5

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Xbox Game Studios **DEVELOPER** Obsidian Entertainment **RELEASE** November 15 **RATING** M

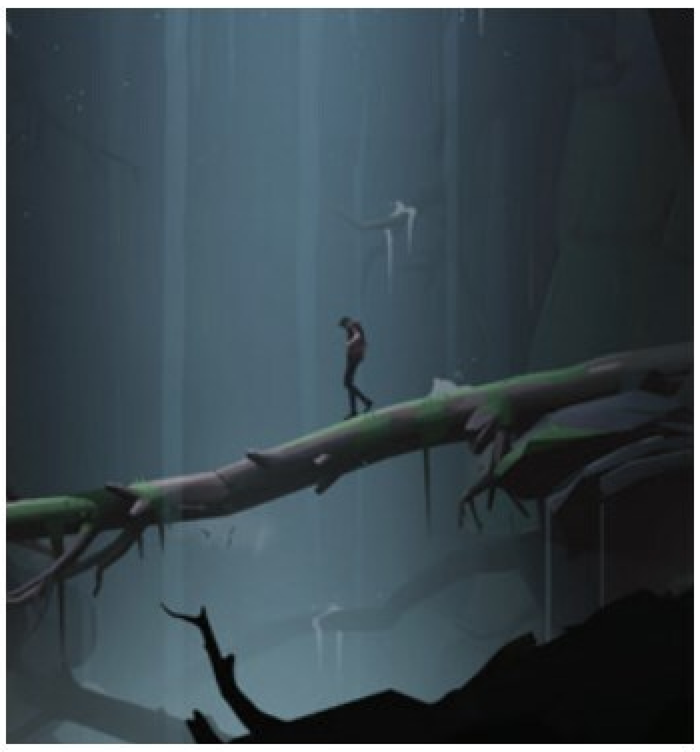
HARVESTELLA

Harvestella's systems feed together in a way that forces engagement with nearly everything it offers, whether you want to or not. But those slice-of-life activities are mundane and get in the way of letting you enjoy the RPG elements on your own terms. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

6.75

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing/Simulation **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix **RELEASE** November 4 **RATING** T

SOMERVILLE



Somerville is held back by technical shortcomings, but is full of impressive moments worth experiencing with the lights turned low and your headphones up high. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■

8

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Jumpship **DEVELOPER** Jumpship **RELEASE** November 14 **RATING** E10+

GOOGLE STADIA: WHAT WENT WRONG?

The game industry reacts to Google's big, failed bet

BY STEVEN L. KENT

STADIA LOOKED LIKE A SURE THING. It offered an alternative to Steam. Instead of giving players a free service, it charged customers a measly $10/month and gave them unlimited access to a growing library of games. This was the video game version of what Netflix brought to movies and Apple Music brought to music.

But there was more. Backed by Google, one of the world's wealthiest and most tech-savvy corporations, Stadia would stream those games across desktops, laptops, tablets, televisions, and cell phones at a silky 60 frames-per-second with high-def resolution. There wouldn't be any slowdown because the games would run on the cloud as they played on your screen.

Big promises to be sure, but this was Google, a company currently valued at about $1.17 trillion, a dominant player in the cloud, and the owner of YouTube. Streaming technology wouldn't be a problem, and neither would advertising.

Google launched Stadia in November 2019. A short three years later, the company announced its plans to discontinue the game service in January 2023.

Stadia was not the sure bet it once appeared to be.

STEVEN L. KENT
Steven Kent is a veteran games writer who has contributed to numerous mainstream and enthusiast magazines throughout his career. He is an author of both fiction and nonfiction books. His latest publication is *The Ultimate History of Video Games: Volumes 1 and 2*.

GAMES ARE HARD

The graveyard of forgotten systems has an entire wing dedicated to video game consoles created by wealthy conquistadors like Magnavox, Apple, Nokia, and Philips. Panasonic failed twice, once partnering with Electronic Arts founder Trip Hawkins and once with Nintendo. But with analysts predicting that interactive game revenue will top $300 billion in the coming years, the temptation to break into gaming is hard to ignore.

"It's a terrible business unless you hit scale," says Wedbush Securities analyst Michael Pachter. "Disney has tried it three times and failed. Comcast/Universal has tried it and never succeeded. Paramount/CBS tried it and failed."

One problem with launching new hardware is that being new isn't enough. You need to be better than everyone else.

"Each system has to be theoretically more powerful with better graphics, better sound, better games, better everything than the system before it so that there is a reason for the consumer to trade up to that new system," says Michael Katz, who launched Mattel's handheld games division and Sega's Genesis.

Stadia didn't necessarily promise "better everything," but it did promise console-quality performance and absolute portability. The Stadia website claimed, "Your old laptops, your phones, your controllers are reborn to play the biggest games in all their glory."

> The name of the game is the game.
>
> – PETER MAIN, FORMER NINTENDO EVP OF SALES AND MARKETING

> It's hard to break in without starting your own platform. It's doubly hard if you are trying to start a platform.
>
> – ROB DYER, COO OF CAPCOM USA

GAMES ABOVE ALL

Mega-publishers like Activision view newcomers warily, and games from small houses don't readily attract a customer base.

How important is having the right games? When SquareSoft and Electronic Arts refused to support the Dreamcast, they shut Sega out of the console business.

"I'm still bitter to this day," admits Peter Moore, the former COO of Sega of America, who oversaw the Dreamcast launch before moving to Xbox and then to EA Sports.

Having seen hardware launches from both sides, he says, "It was difficult to understand where Google would fit in.

"When companies like Google and Apple, to some extent Facebook, come in, you have those meetings. You [try to] understand their plans and make decisions. If there was stuff that needed to go on Stadia, it would have taken us a while to develop it."

DECISIONS AND OUTCOMES

One of the reasons porting games to Stadia was slow was Google's decision to program games in Linux instead of C++, the language used by Sony and Microsoft.

"If you wanted to make a game work on Google Stadia, you had to write it in Linux," says Pachter. "Let's say it costs $5 million bucks. Why would you spend $5 million bucks writing a game for an audience of two people?"

As one of the world's wealthiest companies, Google paid or persuaded companies to overlook those costs. EA released Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order on Stadia in November 2020. Other heavy hitters, including Rockstar, Ubisoft, and Capcom, also published Stadia games.

Google also opened in-house studios, hiring Electronic Arts' widely admired group general manager Jade Raymond to run its newly formed games and entertainment division.

> I was skeptical because I had seen things like that before.
>
> – ED FRIES, FORMER HEAD OF MICROSOFT STUDIOS AND A MEMBER OF THE IGDA FOUNDATION BOARD

> They made the boneheaded decision, you can keep this on the record, to build Stadia in Linux.
>
> – MICHAEL PACHTER, WEDBUSH SECURITIES

ALL THE RIGHT SIGNALS

Having seen several previous train wrecks, many dismissed Stadia as doomed from the start, but Google surprised them with several shrewd moves. The company hired Phil Harrison, a British-born industry veteran who played a key role in helping Sony launch PlayStation, to run Stadia. Harrison, in turn, surrounded himself with star players such as Raymond and former Microsoft general manager of sales, marketing , and supply-chain engineering John Justice.

"Phil ticked all the right boxes," says Dyer, who worked with Harrison during his tenure at PlayStation. "They didn't do anything that made me think, 'That's dumb' or 'I'm not getting it.' There was plenty of right being done, and they wrote big checks in order to get products onto the platform."

Harrison made an all-important presentation at the 2019 Game Developers Conference that won doubters over.

"I was there when they announced it at GDC," says Fries. "I was skeptical when I first went in, but they put on a great presentation. They showed some new ideas that I hadn't seen before, and I walked out more interested than I thought I would be."

Stadia was off to a good start.

STUMBLING OUT OF THE GATE

"I signed up to be one of their early customers," says Fries. "The experience was a lot less than I had been told it would be. It was quite awkward to set up. There were multiple setups that you had to run on multiple devices.

"They promised early customers would have first choice of their names on the system and stuff like that. Then I didn't hear from them again for a long, long time, which I thought was weird."

As promised, Fries was eventually given early access to name selection, but bigger drawbacks emerged.

Stadia launched with a laundry list of problems. Despite earlier promises, Stadia wouldn't work on iPhones until 2020, and latency issues remained. *Ars Technica*'s Kyle Orland began his review with a tagline stating, "Google's game streaming is too limited and too unreliable, for too little benefit."

Wired reviewer Jaina Grey gave Stadia a score of 6/10, praising it for its ability to play PC games on a Chromebook while complaining that there was "a noticeable difference between playing a game on Stadia and running it on local hardware."

According to Pachter, the biggest problem was more fundamental than the latency of portability. It was the business model itself.

"I get that versus the cost of a console, Stadia wasn't prohibitively expensive," says Pachter, "but if you looked at it versus the cost of a cell phone or your PC ... I've already got a PC. I can play games on Steam all day long and not pay for the service.

"Imagine Starbucks coming up with a subscription – all the coffee you can drink for $200 per month. How many people drink that much Starbucks a month? The answer is some, sure. I'm sure there's a few hundred thousand people who go to Starbucks twice a day and drink maybe $7 worth of coffee a day.

"I go to Starbucks twice a month if I'm lucky."

The business model was upside down.

– MICHAEL PACHTER,
WEDBUSH SECURITIES

And then there were the questions about Google's commitment to games. After Google closed its internal game studios in February 2021, Jade Raymond founded Haven Studios Inc in Quebec.

Other cuts followed. John Justice left in May 2021.

Looking from the outside in, people doubted Google's ability to endure the financial strain. Microsoft lost an estimated $7 billion on the original Xbox. As things turned out, Google CEO Sundar Pichai wasn't necessarily willing to go down that path.

Explaining why Microsoft founder Bill Gates was willing to spend so much money launching Xbox, Peter Moore says, "Bill was concerned about Sony and concerned that Sony would ultimately own the living room with the PlayStation."

"I had a chance to ask Bill why he was so focused on Xbox," adds Mike Fischer, the former VP of Entertainment Marketing at Sega and former Consumer and Online Marketing Officer at Microsoft. "He said that he wanted a defensive play against Sony, whom he thought was going to take over the consumer market through the living room. Then he said, 'It's turning out to be even more useful as a strategic play vis-a-vis Apple.'"

Fischer, Moore, and Fries all remember other executives wanting to end the Xbox experiment, but Gates never wavered.

And at Google ...

"I think they got spooked by the cost," says Pachter. "They realized that making games for Stadia; you could spend $100 million. Making 20 games a year was going to cost over $1 billion."

Three years after launching Stadia, Google pulled the plug.

With Amazon, Apple, Meta, and Nvidia looking into new gaming services, Stadia may be a cautionary tale. It takes more than money to break into games. Just ask Nokia, Panasonic, Apple ... and Google. ■

VOTE IN THE 2022 READER'S CHOICE GAME OF THE YEAR POLL

2022 IS COMING TO A CLOSE which means it's time to look back on the year of video games and decide which ones were our favorites and crown the absolute best. Along with our own picks that will be coming up in the next issue, we will be sharing your favorite games, dear reader.

Vote at GameInformer.com/ReaderVote2022, or scan the QR code on the right. We will share the results. Will your picks line up with ours? Or will they be radically different? Find out in the next issue. ■

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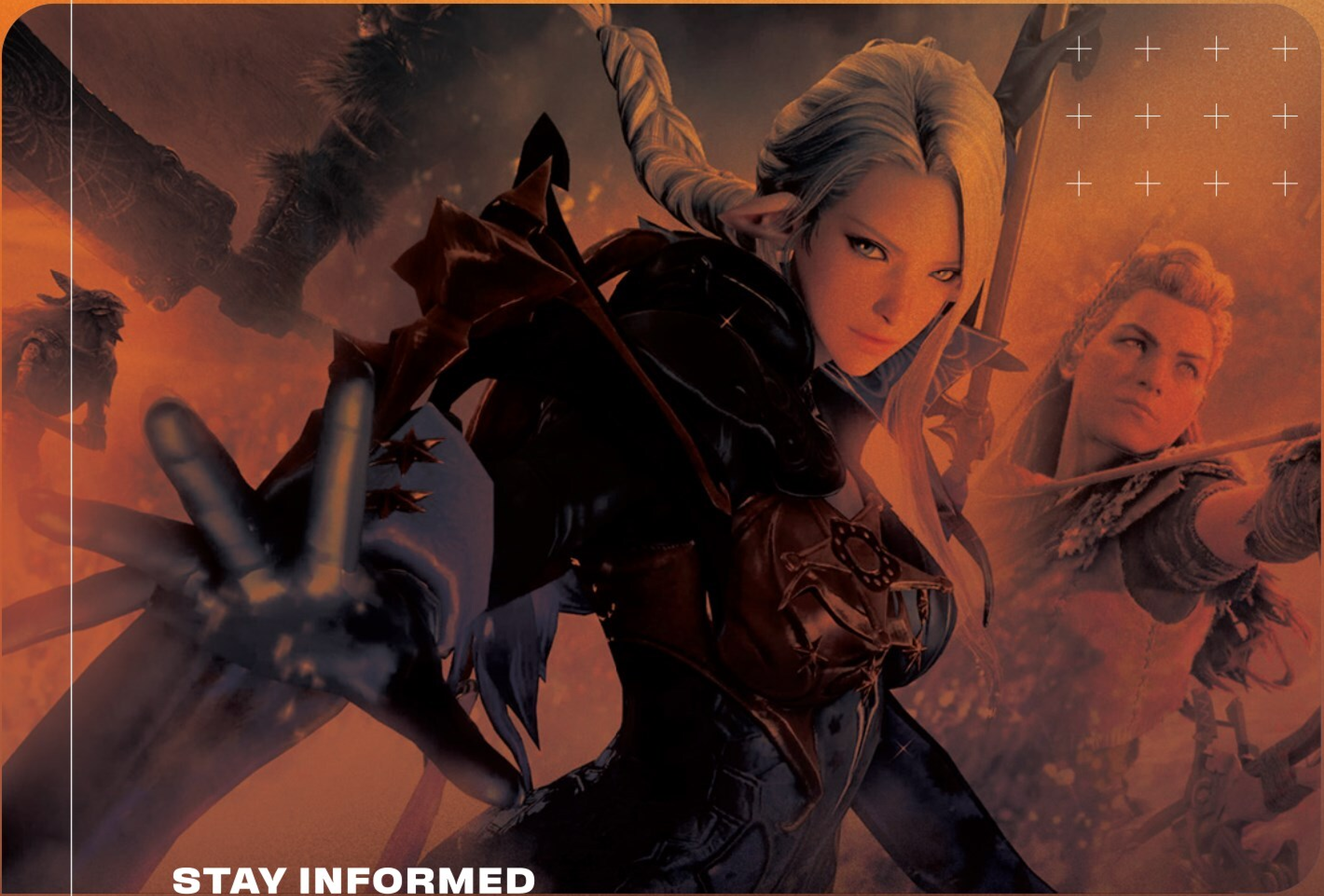

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